

Martyr to Hero: Jorge's Tale

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Summary: When he set off the slipspace bomb, Jorge never thought he'd live past a twitch of his fingers. Now, he and a trio of Saber pilots must save another world stricken with crisis. Too bad Jorge doesn't have any experience with dinosaurs.

1. Enter Sauria

Jorge watched as Noble Six plummeted to Reach, the Spartan II's dog tags clutched in his hands. Six's armor would save him from the terrible fall, especially since Reach had gravity 0.87 times the gravity on Earth. The newest addition to Noble would carry Jorge's memory on, and very soon his name would go on the MIA listings. Because Spartans never die.

He sighed heavily and sent one last look of longing towards the planet that had been his home for over twenty years. _Christ, has it really been that long? _Jorge wondered. He turned to the Pelican, conscious of the shadow slowly crawling from the hangar door. The corvette he and the others had snuck their slipspace bomb onto was almost in contact with the Covenant super carrier. Three marines that had survived the initial assault stood awkwardly around the Pelican, all vividly aware of their situation. They were all silent, however, and seemed to accept their fate. Jorge marveled at this, glancing out at the distinguished pilots of the Saber program. _Had they been any better, they would have been Spartans._ Jorge thought sadly. But without the protective MJOLNIR armor given to all Spartans, none of them would survive a fall like Six. They were sentenced to the same fate as the Covenant corvette they stood in. As he readied the priming wires, Jorge felt the need to tell them that.

"Jenkins, Murphy, AJ." Jorge said roughly. The marines stood at rigid attention, their rifles held out in front of them. "At ease for once." The men relaxed, but still looked at Jorge. He joined two priming wires together, then reached for the last pair. "As far as I am concerned, you three are honorary Spartans. No matter what happens

after this, no matter how we go out, I just want you lads to know that." It felt odd saying that, but these men had just applied their trade to the absolute best of their ability, and their reward was a death sentence. And they took that information well.

Jenkins, apparently the youngest one, spoke up. "I can set off the bomb, sir. Why don't you jump?" He had an accent that reminded Jorge of the Bronx, coupled with the smallest twinge of regret. Jorge grasped the last wires, and the thought crossed his mind... only to be discarded half a second later. He wouldn't leave these brave souls behind.

"No, it's no good. My armor was holed in that last fight," Jorge lied smoothly. "I'm staying with you no matter where we end up." The towering Spartan II took one last glance at Reach. It would be the last time he actually set eyes on the planet, though for different reasons than he thought. Murphy, the taller and more muscular Marine, snorted and shrugged.

"What happens if we end up dead?" He asked, watching with a sense of finality as Jorge connected the last two wires together. The Shaw-Fujikawa slipspace drive began to hum and throb with energy. Jorge stepped back, and they all gasped in amazement as what looked like a blue force field engulfed the ship, as well as the super carrier above them. Just before it reached its peak, Jorge turned to Murphy.

"That won't happen, lad. Spartans never die."

The field collapsed in a flash of white light, taking the corvette, the Sabers on top of it, and roughly half of the Covenant super carrier with it as it tore the entire mass off into another space. Two pale ends of the super carrier fell to Reach, bodies and debris flowing from their ruptured hulls. They would land in the mountains and the sea, momentous reminders of the UNSC's largest kill of the battle of Reach, and the last Covenant warship to fall. As the remains of the Covenant super carrier fell to Reach, and Noble Six along with them, the space towards the north side of the planet began fluctuating and moving. As if heralding the end of days, and ominous whistle sounded across all comms due to the disturbance. And then, one by one, the largest Covenant fleet ever mobilized found itself hovering over the stricken planet.

Twenty-two days later, Noble Six would be the last Spartan to fall in the failed defense of Reach, humanity's largest military installation. Around his body, the ground was covered with bodies of fallen Covenant that had tried and failed to take down the hyper lethal vector. Elites of all ranks and color lay in mounds of limbs and bodies, surrounding the body of the last Spartan on Reach. Noble Six lay dead, his head removed as a trophy by the Field Marshall himself. But lying next to his fractured Mark V (B) helmet several feet away, in the orange dust and dirt, were Jorge's dog tags. Years later, both the helmet and tags would be found by terraformers trying to rebuild the planet. They would later be placed in the Reach Memorial Museum, next to the names of Noble Team. The ONI personnel would retrieve the communication logs from Noble Six's helmet, and next to each member's picture would be their last words.

Carter, Noble 1: _You're on your own, Noble. Carter out._

Kat, Noble 2: _Where does he get off calling a demo op priority one?_

Jun, Noble 3: _I'll get it done, sir._

Emile, Noble 4: _I'm ready! How 'bout you!_

Jorge, Noble 5: _Tell them to make it count._

Spartan B-312, Noble 6: _Good luck, sir._

And Jorge's last words before he was taken from Reach forever would be inscribed on the marble stone of the memorial, immortalized forever on the planet so many died to save.

Spartans never die.

* * *

><p>The jump to slipspace was a lot smoother without engines to push them through. Jorge picked up his helmet and put it back on. He tried to do it quietly, but the three Marines heard the hiss of air being pressurized inside of his suit. His HUD came back online just in time for him to catch a glare from Jenkins. A loud ripping noise above them turned their eyes and rifles upward. The frame of the corvette looked solid, but outside, something seemed wrong with the parts of the super carrier that they had taken with them. The Marines and Jorge walked over to the hangar bay door, and watched in awe as the super carrier was literally torn apart by the unknown physics of slipspace.<p>

The ends of the ship were frayed as it was, but whatever forces with the slipspace rupture they had entered began tearing pieces off of the ship. The men watched in amazement as huge strips of hull just began peeling off the ship like a giant banana, exposing compartments and fuel batteries to the void. When the compartments were exposed, Covenant of all kinds were swept out into the abyss. Grunts, Elites, Jackals, even the mighty Hunters were pulled out into space, where almost all of them suffocated. The bodies flew by as the corvette passed them at the incredible speed it was going, even though they had been perfectly still moments earlier.

Jorge felt a proverbial light bulb go off in his head. Even though the super carrier had been torn to pieces, the corvette was largely intact. It's engines were crippled and access to the top of the ship was impossible, but the corvette was still in working order. It was a far sight from fully operational, but it had a stable atmosphere and very few holes in its hull, something those on the Covenant super carrier were dying for the lack thereof. He had no idea how to operate a Covenant vessel or read their writings, but he was sure that the old fashioned 'try til you die' method would get them farther than sitting on their asses.

"Alright troopers, since we've all come down with a sudden case of 'not dead', I say we get to the bridge and see if we can get this tub out of slipspace." Jorge said, reaching for his Vulcan 55 heavy machine gun. The marines all nodded in agreement, and all of a sudden things seemed less grim. They had expected to just cease to exist, so any alternative really brightened their day.

Jorge thundered down the hallway that led to the bridge, the very same hallway that Noble Six had stormed through with his fire team just ten minutes earlier. Now, it was Jorge and three marines running through the purple-tinted halls, not Six and five marines. The absence of their colleagues did little to slow down the soldiers, but they did pause when they reached the bridge.

Jorge had not been there when Six had charged the bridge. When he looked around the battle torn room, he almost wished he had. Several Grunts lay in front of the door, their corpses riddled with rounds. The pools of blood around them had grown into one large, congealed puddle of purple and blue. To his immediate right, a red Elite Minor slumped up against the wall, his chest cavity blown open by a close-range shotgun blast. His deactivated energy sword lay by his side, circuits fizzling as his viscous blood fried its inner workings. Next to the dead Covenant warrior lay a dead marine, shotgun still clutched in dead fingers. His chin rested on his chest, and his own blood pool mingled with the Elite's next to him. A large stab wound in his chest had ended him, but he had taken the Elite with him in a valiant act of defiance.

The middle of the room had a large holographic display of Reach, though it was no longer a live presentation. Still, the image of his home world made Jorge's chest ache with sadness, yet at the same time swell with pride. Thanks to his pseudo-sacrifice, (he wasn't actually dead, just missing in action. Ironic as hell.) Reach was safe for the moment. He had torn the Covenant super carrier to pieces and scattered its crew across slipspace. When they had jumped into slipspace, there had been no significant sign of Covenant reinforcements. They were heroes.

The area around the large hologram was littered with bullet casings and dead bodies. Three more Grunts lay motionless in front of their computer terminals, two with their heads bashed in and the third with a knife wound in its head. On the raised platform where the helmsman stood, three Elites, one of them a General and probably the ship's captain, lay within a foot of each other. All three had been burned horribly, and each was missing a limb and a sizable amount of chest. That meant they had been clustered together, and Six had thrown a captured plasma grenade into their midst.

The terminal behind them was going insane, its light blue screens running red and purple as it scanned the area around the corvette. AJ ran up to it, nearly tripping over the nine foot tall corpses to his right. He pulled out a PDA and set it next to the console, tapping it several times. After a few seconds, a very familiar voice came over Jorge's personal speakers, as well as the PDA speakers.

"A.I. Auntie Dot online. Running start-up diagnostics... complete." Jorge was mildly surprised to hear Dot's voice again. He had forgotten that Dot was a very popular A.I. Around Reach. ONI and the Intelligence Corps used several versions of her. On Reach, Dot was the new Windows.

"Greetings, Lt. Reuters. How may I be of assistance?" Dot asked through the speakers. Behind Jorge, Murphy and Jenkins snickered at AJ's last name. The lieutenant cast a middle finger in their direction, then turned on the PDA's wireless capabilities.

"Dot, I need you to translate these Covenant controls. When you've

done that, run a scan on the ship and see if you can find a way out of slipspace for us." AJ said hastily, his gaze trailing towards the space that sped by outside. Dot's screen on the PDA blazed as she pushed its processors to the limit. It was an ONI instrument, which made it the same as a Spartan up-link. But even ONI had its limits.

After a pregnant pause, Dot came over the speakers again.

"Scans show that this ship has been heavily damaged by ballistic rounds and missiles. We are currently able to push to 30% thrust, and are incapable of initiating a slipspace jump. Decks A7 through B12 have been breached and sealed. Access to the topside of this ship is also impossible without vacuum-rated equipment." The A.I. reported dutifully. AJ nodded and tucked his head, thinking over everything.

Jorge couldn't help but feel slightly out of place, and he was sure the other two marines behind him were just as uncomfortable. It was obvious that AJ had listened in class, but the others were fighters. Even so, Jorge had heard bits and pieces about slipspace from Kat. Slipspace was like the chutes in a game of Chutes and Ladders. One could travel much farther distances by find Shaw-Fujikawa corridors. Unfortunately, it took a slipspace drive to open the corridors, both to enter and exit them. If they couldn't pull off a slipspace jump, then there was only one other way to get out of it.

"Without a slipspace drive, we'd have be close enough to someone else entering the stream to use their breach." Jorge said, wincing at the plan. Even Kat wouldn't have brought it up; such a maneuver was insane at best, suicide at worst. They would have to come within inches of the other ship in order to squeeze through. That kind of piloting came from years of familiarity with one's ship and with slipspace. The only thing familiar about their surroundings was the unfamiliarity. They had no idea how to work this thing, but their only solution required masterful handling of it. A job for a Spartan alright. Nigh impossible odds and a near certainty of death. Jorge thought humorlessly.

"I've only heard of one ship doing anything like that; the _Iroquois_. My cousin was stationed on it, and he said that Captain Keyes had used one Covvie ship as a shield while sliding around it to shoot at another. The hulls were touching almost continuously. We'd need to pull that one off." Jenkins said with a smirk. It faded, however, when he finished the account. "Problem is, that ship got scrapped." Jenkins looked out into space, watching the remnants of the super carrier before them fly past.

"If we can dash into a rupture before the other ship comes through, we could pull it off. Just angle it so that the other ship doesn't decide to play chicken, because that's a game where everyone loses." AJ said seriously.

The idea was a good one, but Jorge shot it down like a flaming banshee. "You heard Dot," the Spartan II admonished, "this slag heap can't dash anywhere. Unless you've been studying rocket science, we're not moving anywhere fast." AJ frowned and kicked the dead Elites near him angrily. The other two marines tried to look inconspicuous. There had to be some way to get out of the mess they were in...

It was Dot who came forward with the answer, surprisingly. _"After reviewing the damage to this corvette, I have found that the main engine problem stems from substandard energy flow to the engines. If a capacitor was placed on the other side of the break, it would be possible to charge up enough energy for a large boosting action."_ AJ and Jorge looked at each other in surprise. Murphy and Jenkins looked at each other in total confusion. Her plan made sense, but where were they going to find a capacitor?

* * *

><p>"Is it me, or is Dot a little too at home on this ship?" Jenkins grouched as he and Murphy hauled the large, barrel shaped object toward the rear of the ship. Dot had not only been able to locate the capacitor, but she had also found an ideal place to install it, as well as the correct engineering pathway that led straight to the core. What she had not been able to do was restore the lights to that area. After all, she wasn't a 'smart' A.I. Ahead of them, Jorge kept his flashlight trained forward.<p>

"It's just you, lad. She's only following her programming and doing what she can to help." In the darkness, Jorge's voice seemed to echo more than it did. The total dark was disconcerting, and Jorge's light did not fully penetrate the darkness ahead of them. It was like walking on a path in darkened woods: fifteen feet in all directions was yours, the rest belonged to the dark.

"Well, sir, the way I see it, whether she's human or not doesn't change the fact that she's an ONI spook. I mean, come on. You've been around them, you have to know how they are." Jenkins shut up when Jorge stopped and turned, blinding him with the flashlight.

"I also know that she's the reason we can fix this mess and get out of slipspace. When I see a problem with Dot, you'll be the first to know, Lieutenant." He snapped. Jenkins blanched, taken aback, but Jorge was already marching ahead. Murphy and Jenkins hurried to catch up to the gargantuan Spartan, though they followed at a greater distance.

Jorge hadn't meant to react in such a manner, and he sighed with slight embarrassment. Normally, he was cool and collected one. But the stress of the events that had started to get to him. Jorge had been on Reach for his entire adult life, only leaving when Noble was deployed to some doomed planet to kill a few Covvies before the bastards glassed it. Now, the Covenant had found Reach, and even though he had destroyed one super carrier, hundreds more would come. Reach would fall, just as Harvest, the Eridani Belt, and countless other worlds had done. The thought brought a pang of sorrow to him. Images of the families on Reach flashed before his eyes; thousands of men, women, and children would be fleeing for their very lives, trying to make a break for Earth or one of the Inner Colonies. Thousands would try. Hundreds would make it. Even at the height of its power, the UNSC still followed the Cole Protocol. It stated that all jumps from Covenant occupied sectors had to be randomized, no exceptions. And the risk behind even that could lead the Covenant to another UNSC world.

He finally reached the sparking insert where a capacitor had blown during their attack. He reached back and grabbed hold of the

capacitor that the two marines were holding. Jenkins didn't realize Jorge had grabbed it, and was hauled into the air along with it. He gasped in surprise and let go, dropping right on top of Murphy. The larger marine caught him Scooby Doo style, then set him down without another word. Jorge didn't pay attention to them; his focus was on the more dangerous part of this little repair.

The coupling that was sparking had to be connected last, or else the large piece of equipment held carefully in Jorge's hands would explode from the overcharge. But the connecting circuits on the bottom were angled to where it seemed he would connect them at the same time. Jorge gingerly lined the coupling on the bottom up with its mated port, carefully watching the one on top. Sweat beaded his brow inside the Grenadier Mark V helmet, but Jorge ignored it. His concentration was rewarded when a quiet click announced that the pair of joints had fastened together. Jorge breathed a sigh of relief and pushed the top half in too. A low hum filled the room, and light began to slowly filter through the capacitor as energy began storing inside of it. Jorge nodded to himself, then turned to the troopers.

"Let's get back up to the bridge." He said neutrally. "I think they're going to need our help up there."

"Lt. Reuters. The capacitor has been installed and is now charging." _ Dot reported. AJ nodded, still watching the black abyss that was slipspace for any sign of a rupture. Of course, that was like looking for a diamond with a kaleidoscope. The ripples and curves of slipspace made spotting a jump impossible.

"Capacitor charged. Allowing trickle charge to primary engines. Current engine thrust: 10%. A five second burst at full power is available. Noble Five and the others are approaching." _

AJ turned to see Jorge, Murphy and Jenkins enter the bridge. He waved, then went back to scanning the outside. Jorge walked up beside him and looked out as well. However, deciphering the black abyss and random streaks of light was difficult, even for his enhanced vision. They would have to rely on Dot and whatever she could glean from the crippled ship's sensors.

"Where do you think the rupture will spit us out, sir?" Murphy asked. He shifted on his feet, clearly uncomfortable. He struck Jorge as a guy that wanted to do something, not sit on his ass.

"I've never spent this much time in slipspace, and never on a Covenant ship. Who knows how they approach slipspace?" Jorge said, pulling his helmet off and wiping his brow. He had a very limited understanding of slipspace. Hell, most of humanity was clueless as to how it worked. Explanations were both vague and varied, and were confused further by debates among the masses. He never considered himself an expert by that respect.

Now that Dot had fully primed the engines for their boost of greatness, there wasn't really anything left to do on the ship. Repairing it was completely out of the question, since they lacked the tools and expertise. The Pelican was stuck, and the engineer that had piloted it had been the one to catch a sword to the chest. It was impossible to bring the Sabers around until they reached normal space, since venturing outside of a ship in slipspace would be like

jumping into a very large blender. Jorge was starting to feel a bit tired after the days events, and he could see the marines were tired as well. Murphy and Jenkins weren't bantering as much as they had been, and AJ had already stifled several yawns. Jorge heaved a massive yawn himself, and decided that rack time was fast approaching.

"Dot's got better eyes than we do. Let's get some rest while we can. We have no idea what we're going to run in to." He said wearily. None of the marines complained at his night call. Jenkins plopped down next to a dead Elite, removing his helmet with a grunt. He was a young man, with a shallow face. His brown hair was cut to under an inch in a high and tight, with only the smallest hairs peppering his chin. He pushed the Elite slightly, tipping the corpse over, then laid his head where the body had sat. Murphy just leaned against a wall, slumped down, and started snoring. He didn't even bother to remove his helmet. AJ sat down with his back to the console and removed his helmet, revealing a bald young man with a blond beard around his mouth. He sighed and leaned back, trying to get a more comfortable position. When he was satisfied, he fell asleep within moments. Jorge took off his helmet and set it down beside him. He brought his Vulcan around and stuck it between himself and the wall, before leaning up against it. He closed his eyes, and was unconscious almost immediately. While the humans slept, Dot continued to monitor for slipspace ruptures, using the corvette's scanning equipment to search for any applicable exits.

Jorge tried not to dream, but images flashed through his mind regardless of his wishes. Instead of seeing a field of wheat or a sandy beach, he saw visions of battles both great and small. The first was of Noble Team, minus himself, running through a destroyed office lobby. Kat was saying something, though he couldn't quite make out the words. She and Six raced across the lobby towards the others, until the unthinkable happened. Like lightning from the sky, a Covenant needle from a Needle Rifle punched straight through the top of Kat's head, exiting from her chin. The female Spartan fell like a load of bricks, and Six must have heard her. He turned, and when he saw her, he came back and grabbed her by the shoulders. Kat didn't move, and Six's gaze drifted upward. He grabbed the sidearm from Kat's thigh and began firing up at some unseen foe. As soon as the flash from the first shot disappeared, so did the image. _What? What is this? Am I dreaming?_

The next image was of a dirt rock canyon, with a huge Covenant Scarab hanging over a path laid in the rock. Underneath the Scarab some small distance away, Emile and Six stood under a cave exit. The Scarab spotted them, and began charging its main cannon in a cloud of green energy. It was interrupted, however, by a burst of heavy machine gun fire to its neck joint. The Scarab cast its head upward to see a Pelican fly above it, the right wing engulfed in flames. The Pelican arched around, but the Scarab ignored it and turned to the two Spartans trapped in the cave. This time, Jorge could hear Carter's voice clearly, though he sounded a little beat up.

"You're on your own, Noble." Was he FLYING THE PELICAN? _"Carter out."_ In a great explosion of fire and shrapnel, Carter drove the Pelican straight into the side of the Scarab. The great Covenant weapon platform screeched in an almost organic cry of surprise, blue plasma venting from the colossal hole in its side. It scrabbled at the hill in vain, and fell from the canyon to the plains below. _No,

not Carter... he's indestructible! There's no way he-- Jorge was interrupted again.

Another image crossed Jorge's stressed subconscious, but it had no movement. Just an image of Emile stabbing his knife into the neck of a Covenant Elite, Zealot class, with an energy sword protruding from his abdomen.

As Jorge's mind began to race at the scenes, he was offered one final glimpse at Noble Team: Noble Six stood in the middle of a field full of dead Elites. He held a pistol in one hand, an assault rifle in another. He fired in two direction, though it seemed he was on his last legs. An Elite Zealot shoulder checked Six, sending the Spartan to the ground and disarming him. The Elite drew back its sword for the final blow, but was thwarted by a kick to the face. Six tried to stand, only for another Elite to arrive. He kicked it as well, and rolled away from a downward stab by a third Elite. More began to arrive, and Six's movements grew more frenzied. Then, out of the corner of Jorge's eye, another Zealot arrived. Six was too busy punching a downed Elite he had in a headlock, and Jorge watched the sword fall.

_No... no, it's impossible. We saved them. I saved them... what is all this?_He thought frantically. His mind tried to grasp the images before it, but they were too much. _No, it has to be a dream! Just a dream!_ The darkness began to peel away as he was shaken into wakefulness, Carter's words echoing in his mind. _You're on your own._

* * *

><p>"Are you alright, sir? Sir? Are you alright?" Jenkins shook Jorge for the fifth time, and he finally awoke. Jorge's face was covered in sweat, and he was breathing heavily. The Spartan looked around the room, eyes wild as the shock of his dreams still weighed heavily on his mind. Jenkins and AJ were Bending over him, looking concerned. AJ had Jorge's helmet in his hands, and the Spartan could see his reflection in the visor. He looked like a cornered animal, eyes wide and teeth bared. He looked away and behind the marines, where it looked like Murphy was arguing with Dot. At least, he was waving his arms around a lot.<p>

Jorge shook his head, then moved to stand up. Jenkins and AJ backed up quickly as the colossal Spartan heaved himself up. Jorge took his offered helmet and quickly put it on, embarrassed that the others had seen him in such a state. Spartans were calm and collected, never fearful and wild.

"Are you ok, sir?" AJ asked quietly. Jenkins looked concerned as well. "You were mumbling and talking in your sleep. You had us scared there for a second."

Jorge sighed heavily. What had happened, anyway? A premonition? The only one among the Spartans that showed precognitive abilities had been Kurt before he had disappeared. Still, the images had seemed so vivid, so _real_... All Jorge could do was hope that they had been dreams and nothing more.

"I'm fine." Jorge said, switching back over to his 'I'm in charge' tone. "What's the situation?" Jenkins flinched, then looked back at

Murphy. All three of them heard, "You spastic, insane pile of ONI bolts! The only good that would come out of that is that you would die with us, you small, insignificant little..." and so on. His vocabulary was getting creative, to say the least. Jorge decided to find out himself, and brushed past the two marines.

"What's the problem?" Jorge asked authoritatively. The effect was compounded by the fact that he stood around seven foot ten. Murphy turned, his anger evident in his voice.

"Einstein the calculator here found a 'slipspace anomaly'." He accented with his fingers. "And without a second thought, has decided to push us through it. With no idea as to where we'll end up, or when it will close." To her credit, Dot only sounded slightly miffed.

"Scans show that this anomaly has been in place for quite some time, and shows no signs of closing in the foreseeable future, Captain Murphy. I can only offer the best solution to our problems." She said with a huff. Jorge would have laughed had the situation not been so serious. He just settled for an invisible smile hidden by his helmet and patted Murphy on the shoulder.

"We don't have very many supplies to sustain ourselves, so we're going to have to take our chances with this." He lifted his gaze up to the PDA, where Dot was housed. "You're sure it will stay open, Dot? We can't afford to get cut in half like that super carrier."

"Affirmative. With our current engine problems, I would recommend using our boost to reach the anomaly, then use standard thrust to slowly enter the portal." The A.I. said matter-of-factly. She didn't seem the least bit worried about the alternative, should her plan not work. Then again, only rampant A.I. worried about termination. You couldn't judge her by her facial expressions, either. And it was up to Jorge to decide: try for the anomaly, or wait for a more secure route. Still, there was a slim chance of getting another opportunity, and they were supposed to die with the bomb. Borrowed time or not, they weren't risking much.

"Do it." He said stonily. AJ and Jenkins exchanged worried looks. Murphy looked ready to eat his own helmet, judging by the way he was clenching his fists. But Dot had received her orders.

"Understood. Initiating course correction. I would recommend holding on to something." Dot said quickly. The soldiers braced themselves against various instruments in preparation for the thrust. Even though they braced, the feeling of going from zero to full throttle still knocked Jorge and Murphy off their feet, sending them both to the deck with two heavy thuds. Jenkins and AJ bumped knuckles at their success, and watched in fascination as the corvette sped toward what they recognized as a wavering expanse of space. It was like getting close to a mirage. Unlike a mirage, however, this disturbance didn't disappear. Instead, it engulfed the bow of the corvette, and a shimmering light coated the edges of the rupture. Dot pushed the engines back up to their pitiful maximum speed, and the rupture came at them fast. Jorge had one last chance to think, _this might be a bad idea,_ before they were back in normal space.

The corvette slowed immediately, allowing Jorge and the marines to

get a good look at their surroundings. Space looked like regular space: black emptiness, stars in the distance, giant forested planet, a comet way off in the distance. Yep, totally normal.

"Dot." Jorge said authoritatively. "Run our location through the star charts, check for any recognizable constellations. Scan to see if that planet below us is inhabited while you're at it." Jenkins and AJ hurried over to the window to get a good look at the planet. Murphy walked up to the window behind them, though in a more professional manner.

The planet was massive. It was easily the size of Uranus, much larger than Earth and Reach. (No jokes people. Seriously.) It was covered with jungle, forests that sprawled all across its surface. There were several breaks in the sea of foliage, such as an ocean or two, and a high peak towards the northern pole. Still, it looked peaceful, with no sign of any space worthy vessels or installations. With such dense foliage, it was hard to tell, but he couldn't even see any population centers. Still, Dot would know.

"Noble Five. No known constellations are within scan range. Our current location is unknown. There is only one known star within this ship's scan range." _Jorge snorted. Figures. Of course they would have popped out somewhere not on UNSC records. They were far away from home if only one star was recognized.

"_As for the planet below us, scans of the surface show large lifeforms, but only a primitive amount of settlements. No human activity detected."_ Dot reported. THAT got Jorge's attention. Settlements were one thing, but alien settlements were quite another. Had the Covenant started colonizing another planet? Or were there other, yet unknown aliens living here? He frowned inside his helmet, and looked down at the planet.

"Are there any Covenant vessels nearby? We aren't in any condition to fend off enemy forces." Jorge said with a sigh. They had the paltry supplies in the Pelican, a handful of Sabers on the top of the ship that they couldn't get to without landing the ship and climbing the damn thing, and whatever captured weapons they could scrounge up from the corpses. As far as ammunition was concerned, each bullet would be worth its weight in gold in uncharted space. They would have to make each shot count, and avoid conflict whenever possible.

Jenkins turned around, and his voice seemed strained. "Uh, sir. The planet's getting closer..." Jorge rushed over to the window. The marine was right. As he watched, the image of the large planet grew bigger and bigger. He turned around to the control desk.

"Dot, can't you keep this scrap heap in orbit?" He demanded. Murphy had already backed away from the window. AJ sprinted over to the helm, looking at the controls. A blinking hologram was rapidly going from blue to red. He assumed that was the altimeter.

"Negative, Noble Five. Our improvised boost has completed the break in the power grid from the core to the engines."_ Dot said. How could an A.I. be so calm at a time like this? Jorge looked back at the rapidly approaching planet. His mind raced, but for once he couldn't think of any way to get out of their situation. AJ, thankfully, was on the ball.

"Dot!" The lieutenant cried. "Use the stabilizing thrusters to level us out! We need to land on our ass, not our nose!" Dot seemed to process this, then complied. _"Affirmative."_

Their descent was halted slightly, and Jorge could just barely see columns of fire near the viewport. The planet fell below them as the corvette rotated, presenting its bottom to the planet. Jorge sighed in relief. If all went well, they could use the stabilizing thrusters to negotiate a softer landing. Then, they could check out some of the

A series of small explosions rocked the bridge, sending Murphy to the deck again. Jorge joined him in swearing up and down the room, and Jorge pointedly looked back over to the helm.

"What just happened?"

"Error. Stabilizing thrusters offline." Dot told him unapologetically. Jenkins snorted at her words and watched several chunks of the ship go plummeting to the planet below them.

"Offline? They're fucking gone! You blew 'em right off the ship, ya damn calculator!" He said with more than a little venom. Dot was rapidly making her way to losing the popularity vote. Though, if one thought about it, it was doubtful she would mind.

Jorge looked down at the planet they were falling towards, now seeing clouds pass them by. He kept looking across the horizon, as it was more preferable than looking around at the panicking marines, or God forbid, the ground. As he looked across the surface of the planet, he couldn't help but notice a chunk of a continent just rising into the air. _That's not supposed to happen,_ he thought with a detached sense of humor. But even as he watched, pieces of the planet began lifting off of the surface, staying in atmosphere but not where they were supposed to be.

He was about to comment on the strange scene when the entire ship rocked, and a huge _BOOM_ echoed from below. The impact sent every one of them to the ground this time, and ejected Dot from the helm. Jorge became intimately acquainted with the interior of his helmet, and slammed his forehead right into the visor. The last thing he saw before his vision faded to black was Murphy's black helmet slamming to the deck beside him.

* * *

><p>The first thing Jorge heard when he awoke was the sound of chirping birds. It had always calmed him on Reach when he heard all those birds just going about their merry way. It was Mother Nature's way of saying that everything was alright. Jorge was calm and content for once, and just reveled in the feeling. It was so nice to just not give a shit anymore, even for a split second. I can't lie here forever, though, he realized regretfully. So, with great reluctance, Jorge opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the Sun glaring down on him, and everything else was dark. It was just a floating ball of light surrounded by darkness. He blinked in surprise, and rolled over onto his side. Immediately, his helmet depolarized, and everything brightened again. Jorge shook his head to clear his mind of the

debilitating fog, then looked around.

The bridge had been redecorated, to put it lightly. Both viewports had been smashed outward by the force of the impact, which made the ship no longer space-worthy. As such, light filtered into the command center, and bathed the area in a warm, tranquil gold. It was the calm after the storm, to be sure. Jorge stood up, still slightly disoriented. He tapped himself on the head three times.

"Come on, Jorge," he said to himself, "time to wake up." The drowsiness and disorientation was alleviated slightly, and he then noticed one other thing: his team was gone. He looked all around the bridge, and the only thing that he saw was Jenkins' helmet. Dot's PDA was nowhere to be found. Even his Vulcan was gone, a fact that annoyed Jorge greatly. He stomped over to the helmet and scooped it up, not looking at it as he scanned the bridge for any sign of where they had gone. _If those little bastards think they can just run off with my weapon without waking me, then I'm going to break-_ His internal tirade was cut off when he looked down at the helmet, and saw that the entire right side was covered in crimson blood. The sight shocked him, and Jorge held the helmet a little farther away. That much blood couldn't be lost and the person still get up and run. As he looked around, he saw several other blood spots. There was easily a pint in between what lay on the deck and what coated the helmet in his hands. But where had they gone?

Jorge walked over to the shattered viewport and looked out. The dense foliage he had admired from orbit now blocked his vision of anything more than twenty meters away. And the trees were huge! They easily dwarfed the Redwoods that Jorge had grown up with on Reach. As impressive as the botany was, though, a much more urgent matter garnered his attention. Because there, leaned up against the viewport from the outside, was a ladder. It was made from wood and vine, and appeared to be very old. That meant that someone had taken the marines, and left him behind. And it obviously wasn't the Covenant. No true Covvie would leave a helpless Spartan alive, so there had to be a third factor. Jorge's memory flashed to what Dot had said earlier. _Primitive settlements._ That meant a bunch of natives had run off with his team. Jorge immediately went into forensics mode.

He ran forward and vaulted out the viewport, ignoring the ladder completely. It was doubtful anything made of wood could hold a Spartan's weight. He landed more quickly than he expected, and turned to examine the ship. The impact must have been terrible, because debris was scattered all over the surrounding area. Panels and wires and all sorts of unidentifiable machinery lay embedded in the dirt. Several trees were splintered and had fallen, a surprising fact considering their immense size. What the most amazing thing was that instead of shattering into a million pieces or sending the core into a meltdown, the unique design of the Covenant corvette had allowed for the lower decks to cushion the landing. It was like landing on a fragile spring. The ring that surrounded the keel of the ship absorbing a lot of force, then shattered. The end result left the top of the ship completely intact, albeit embedded in the ground.

Jorge jerked his gaze away from the ship, instead checking the area for any sign of where the natives had taken the marines. He didn't have to look far. As clear as day, a dirt path through the jungle of trees led away from the crash site. Jorge jogged towards the path,

scanning the horizon for any sign of a settlement. Primitive tribes in millenia past had been known to travel for days when hunting. Jorge could only hope that the natives had been close to their village when the corvette came down.

As he was about to try the radio to see if any of his men still had their helmets, Jorge came across a footprint in the dirt. Normally that wouldn't faze him, and he already knew the general direction they had gone. But what stopped him was the shape of the print. Instead of the five toes and curved foot of a human, he found an arrow-like foot with three toes, all of them ending in points. If he didn't know better, Jorge would've been inclined to call it a dinosaur print. For some reason, that thought unsettled him greatly.

A deep booming sound interrupted Jorge's CSI moment, and he looked up. The sound came again, followed by another. The tempo picked up, and Jorge realized that it was a drum being played. The sound deepened as more joined in, and it began to sound like a rather nasty occurrence was on its way. _Natives and drums, plus missing squadmates, equals a situation I'd rather not be in._ Jorge thought sardonically. In all the old movies, natives only played drums when the captives were about to die. Movies weren't the gospel truth, mind you, but it was a far too common trait not to carry some truth to it. With that in mind, Jorge began sprinting towards the sound of the drums, feet pounding down the dirt path.

* * *

><p>Phew. A good introductory chapter by my judgment. I don't see very many good stories under this category, so I decided to take a crack at it.<p>

2. Dangerous Natives

Well, I've finally taken up the reins with this one. Several months ago, I ended up deleting a Star Fox story that I was mortified to have ever posted. While I won't be reviving that one for quite some time, I just wanted to get a good story out here, in this part of my psyche.

****Ain't No Rest for the Wicked**** by _Cage the Elephant._

* * *

><p>The run to the village was much shorter than Jorge had expected, both because of his speed and because of the short distance. He let the path wind and ravel until the drums became unbelievably loud, then broke off into the underbrush. If he followed the path religiously, he would wind up walking right through the front gate. While he wasn't nearly as stealthy as Noble Six or Jun, Jorge could go unnoticed when he really wanted to. And this was just such an occasion.<p>

Jorge was especially lucky to find that the village was located in a valley, as his jungle detour led him to a hillside overlooking the collection of huts and fire pits. The village itself was actually quite impressive; a wall of sharpened stakes, roughly a foot thick and twelve feet high, surrounded the huts. Each hut was comprised of

wood, bone, and tanned hide, and stood about nine feet tall and was suspended about a foot off of the ground to keep it dry in case of flooding. The fire pits were dug into the ground, with several indentations made like seats to hold the tribe in a cookout or meeting. All in all, it looked just as Jorge had presumed. To his surprise, the drums had stopped, though when he couldn't recall.

Despite the fact that the village was of a decent size, there didn't seem to be any natives about. The fires were smoldering, and several hides were strung out on a line to dry. Jorge assumed that the inhabitants had either taken cover from the heat (which he was immune to in his climate-controlled MJOLNIR armor) or were busy doing something in the tents. Either way, Jorge knew he would need to get their attention, as the captured marines probably weren't in a good spot right now. _If they're even alive,_ Jorge thought morosely.

The Spartan II scanned the camp, looking for some way to draw out the natives without actually entering the walls yet. He didn't want to be out in the open when they came running out. He finally found the perfect target: a large bell near one of the fire pits, presumably a way to signal a meal or announcement. In this case, it would serve Jorge perfectly. He looked down at the forest floor and spotted a rock roughly the size of a softball. He picked it up, hefting its weight. It felt lighter than air, though he was a super soldier encased in power armor. If it had felt heavy, he would have had bigger problems. Jorge examined the distance from his current vantage point to the bell. It would be a seventy-five yard throw, and he would have to be spot on. Luckily, he had been tossing frag grenades for most of his adult life that weighed roughly the same.

Adjusting his arc to compensate for the distance, Jorge heaved the rock with a muffled grunt. It sailed through the air beautifully, and pegged the bell right in its center. A loud _BONG _echoed from the bell, right before it fell to the ground with a similar noise. Jorge pumped his fist in celebration, then crouched down and waited.

Sure enough, the hide covered the entrance to the hut closest to the bell shifted, and Jorge got his first look at a local. It was nowhere near what he had expected. A scaly, clawed hand pushed the animal hide out of the way, and something resembling a cross between an Elite and a Jackal exited the hut, sniffing the air curiously. No, scratch that, it looked like a _dinosaur._ It was green in appearance, though its chin and chest was white. A square, blocky head sat on wide, powerful shoulders. Its eyes were semi-binocular, set above its nose but still towards the sides of its head. The native wore an improvised version of body armor, made of several pelts sewn together, and a low loin cloth made of material similar to the fabric covering the entrance to the hut. Its arms were thick, built with strong muscle. Its legs looked similar to an Elite's, with thick, muscular thighs and reversed knees, like a bird. Its feet had three toes, each ending in a vicious looking claw. Its foot matched the footprint he had found on the path behind him, confirming his suspicion: whatever these dinosaur people were, they had been the ones to take the marines.

The dinosaur cautiously peeked around the corner to where the bell had fallen. Its behavior told Jorge that this particular tribe â€" or perhaps just this poor sucker â€" wasn't very high on the food chain. Considering his fierce appearance, that either meant that his armor

was just for show, or this planet was exponentially more dangerous than he had previously thought. The native quickly trotted over to where the bell had fallen and picked it up with both hands. As he examined the bell, another native exited the hut closest to the gate. This one was brown in color, and slightly smaller in both size and build than the first. It wore no armor, but rather a tunic that covered more than just a loincloth. It crossed the fifteen yards in between itself and the other dinosaur.

The first dinosaur looked up at its companion, then offered the bell for examination. The new native took the bell gingerly in its hands and turned it over, looking it over carefully. It clicked its tongue and rotated the bell to show a large dent in the side. It showed its discovery to the green dinosaur, who began looking around the camp. It spotted the rock near the stand that had held the bell, and picked it up. When the green dinosaur showed it to the brown one, the smaller dinosaur walked over and placed the bell back on its stand. The brown native took a step back to examine its work, then began speaking to the green dinosaur in a series of clicks, hisses, and growls. The green native responded in kind, and they began to have a little conversation.

As fascinating as it was to watch an unknown and primitive species interact, Jorge realized with slight annoyance that his idea didn't produce the reaction he had expected. He couldn't go with the bell again, as the dinosaurs would easily be able to track the trajectory of the rock back to him. He would have to find a different method of attracting a majority of the village's attention. If he could somehow falsely alert the dinosaurs, get them to focus on another direction. That would both thin them out and keep their attention elsewhere. Jorge looked for a way to accomplish this, when something else did it for him.

A commotion came about on the opposite side of the village, drawing the eyes of the two natives down below. The green dinosaur barked at his smaller comrade, and the brown native dashed into the nearest hut. Within moments, more bipedal dinosaurs of various colors and clothing began to emerge, some wielding clubs or axes. One particularly tall native even had a musket, though its maintenance was questionable at best. Still, every villager gathered and looked to the south, and Jorge used their distraction to his benefit. As what he assumed was the final warrior left the hut nearest to Jorge, the Spartan silently slid down the hill he had used for cover. He skidded quickly down the slope, and came to a rest a few feet from the high wall. He jumped up and grasped the top, his thick gloves protecting his hands from the sharp points. It still hurt, but he would at least keep the use of them. With a mighty heave of his large shoulders, Spartan 052 pulled himself up and over the large barrier. He landed on the other side with a heavy thud, and paused. He listened for any sign of a native reacting to his presence, but thankfully heard none. Instead, he heard a sound that had put him unconscious just a few hours ago: a ship crashing.

The tell-tale rumbling and smashing of trees, interrupted by an explosion and rending metal greeted Jorge's ears. As the rumbling continued, Jorge's mind raced. _Did someone follow us? Or did the super carrier come in with us?_ Either way, that wasn't the best news he could have heard. It meant throwing a variable into a sea of variables. Hazarding a glance around the corner of the hut, he saw a small amount of smoke rising in the distance. Closer to him, the

dinosaur native had already gathered up in a large armed party, and where steadily moving out into the jungle, towards the stricken ship. Jorge looked around in surprise, as it seemed that every single dinosaur had gone. That either meant that they were really stupid, or confident in their abilities to remove any squatters that might sneak into the village.

Jorge came around to the other side of the hut, his gaze still on the smoke rising in the distance. It wasn't a large trail of smoke, which meant that the ship wasn't too big, either. A super carrier coming down would have blackened the horizon with fire and smoke. Judging by the distance (it had to have been close, to have made so much noise) and the smoke, he guessed it had been a small craft. Either a fighter or an escape pod, definitely something of that size. A muffled groan from the hut beside him snapped Jorge out of his reverie, and he filed the crash away for further thought. He crouched down, and slowly came across to the entrance of the hut. He wasn't armed with anything larger than a pair of knuckledusters, and they were in his pack. Still, he thought he could take a lizard that was a foot or two shorter than he was.

Jorge pushed the hide to the hut out of his way, and his visor depolarized to allow him to see in the surprisingly dark hut. It was pretty bare, with a wooden shield and several spears made of bone laying next to the door. The floor was made of several thick wooden boards, roughly cut but still stable. The only thing in the hut other than the weapons and shield was a black-clad body in the back. A human body. An IFF transponder signal popped up on Jorge's HUD, with the letters 'AJ' hanging over the slumped figure. If the transponder popped up, it also meant that he was alive. Jorge ran to AJ's prone form and shook him by the shoulder. Muffled mumbling inside of his helmet told Jorge that he was probably still out from the crash. Jorge continued to shake him, and AJ finally shook his head and looked up slowly.

"Ugh... did someone get the vintage on that bottle?" He asked groggily. His gaze finally focused on Jorge, and he perked up a bit. "Sir! What I meant to say was, 'did someone get the license plate on that bus', sir!" AJ quickly said, covering up his drunken dream. Jorge chuckled, then heaved the marine up onto his feet.

"I'll let than one slide, lieutenant. How are you feeling?" Jorge asked, looking AJ over. His armor wasn't ruptured anywhere, and no limbs were bent the wrong angle. Odds were that the natives had just picked him up and carried him off.

"Pardon my humor sir, but I feel like I just crashed on a Covenant corvette." AJ said with a wry grin, though it was hidden by his helmet. Jorge shook his head, then pulled the marine up onto his feet, standing in the process. AJ shook himself, then looked around for his assault rifle. Unfortunately, said weapon did not appear to his gaze, and he looked back at Jorge.

"So," the bald Sabre pilot said with an expectant pause, "do I get to kill things bare-handed or do I get to shoot little metal things at people?" Jorge looked around as well, but sure enough; there was no assault rifle. He hadn't seen any weapons lying around on the corvette, so it was safe to assume that the natives had taken them somewhere. He turned back toward the entrance and held a gloved finger up in front of his face, telling AJ to stay quiet. He nodded,

and followed Jorge as the Spartan slowly exited the hut.

The natives still hadn't returned, as the village was empty when they exited the hut. Jorge didn't want to stay out in the open for long; he had no idea when the dinosaurs would show back up. He crossed the middle of the village swiftly, with AJ close behind. He barged into the next hut, caution forgotten. The scene that greeted him was similar to the hut he had just left: a black-clad soldier slumped against the wall. Again, an IFF transponder signal popped up on his HUD, but this time it read 'SCOUT', which was Jenkins' designation. The man's eyes were closed, and his hands had unconsciously gone to his left side. As Jorge looked closer, he could see a red stain on Jenkins' clothing there, in between the chest armor and his utility thigh armor. Jenkins was wounded, either in the crash or by the natives later. Jorge tapped the floor with his boot, and Jenkins stirred. The man looked up groggily, then cracked a crooked grin when he saw Jorge and AJ.

"Well well, sleeping beauty is finally awake," Jenkins said hoarsely. Jorge at first didn't know what he meant, until he thought back to the corvette. _The natives must not have been able to carry me, so they just left me there._ He realized. Jorge cracked a smile of his own.

"You lads got yourself captured and didn't even have the common courtesy to wake me up." Jorge retorted. Jenkins shrugged, but then hissed in pain and tighten his hold around his side. He still had a comeback though.

"What can I say, my hands were tied. Literally." He said through clenched teeth. Jorge decided that the banter was over, and stepped into the hut. He ran forward and gently removed Jenkins' hands from the wound, and grimaced at the sight of a deep puncture wound in the lieutenant's side, about three inches across and most likely deep. The priority for Jenkins would be to bandage him up and find a safe place to rest. Jorge had some biofoam in his pack, but he didn't want to risk the lizards coming back while he was digging through it. They'd have to treat Jenkins later.

"AJ, can you carry him?" Jorge asked insistently. AJ nodded, and Jorge quickly passed Jenkins to the other marine. He heard AJ grunt with effort, and felt slight concern. If AJ was still tired from his recent trip to dream land, a quick escape would be out of the question. Which meant that they had to get out of there fast. He scanned the interior of the hut one last time, but still couldn't find their weapons. That meant that they were probably hidden away, or near Murphy. Jorge turned and clanked out of the hut, with AJ and Jenkins following behind.

Jorge was in the next hut before the two marines could follow. This one actually had a table, one desperately needed in order to showcase the most recent finds: Jorge's Vulcan 55, two MA5B Assault Rifles, and a Designated Marksman Rifle (DMR). Jorge grinned inside of his helmet, and scooped up all four weapons. The ammunition hadn't been taken from the marines, which meant that the lizards had no idea how to work the weapons. For some reason, Jorge found that reassuring. _Now all we have to do is find Murphy, then we can get out of this village._ Jorge thought. He turned, the four weapons in his arms, and exited the hut. When he reached the outside, he found AJ looking at Jenkins' wounds. He looked toward where the other ship had crashed,

but saw no movement beneath the treeline. Whatever had landed was keeping them awful busy.

He was about to give AJ his assault rifle when another IFF popped up on his HUD. It read 'Murphy', and the arrow pointed to the hut to his right. He turned to look, and Murphy stepped out into the sunlight, his boot knife in hand. The marine still wore his helmet, and looked perfectly fine as far as injuries were concerned. He tossed a cut piece of rope onto the ground, shaking his head.

"These dinosaur natives have no idea how to search someone. I almost feel offended that I was captured in the first place." He said gruffly. His gaze turned to Jenkins, and he tilted his head. "Then again, they did get the drop on us." He held out his hand, and Jorge tossed him one of the assault rifles. Murphy caught it deftly, then activated the holographic ammo counter. The rest of the lights on the weapon activated as well, signifying that its computer system had linked with Murphy's HUD. With a satisfied nod, Murphy slung the rifle onto his back. It was time to go. They had no reason to linger, and several to leave. But still, he was curious...

"AJ, take Jenkins and get back to the corvette. Murphy and I will go scout out that ship, see if we can find any supplies." Jorge said, and walked over to the two limping marines. He put Jenkins' DMR on the magnetic strap on his back, and did the same for AJ's MA5B. AJ nodded in agreement, then set off down the dirt path, toward the corvette. Jorge watched them go for a moment, then turned toward the south, hefting his Vulcan and attaching it to a two point magnetic belt on his waist. Murphy looked toward the smoke, then shrugged.

"I've always loved _Jurassic Park,_" he said with a smirk. Jorge grinned as well, and they began their run, following the smoke trail.

* * *

><p>The Sharpclaw leader, a big red brute, gaped at the space bird that had just crashed into his territory. He had seen the one before, and had taken the simians that had been aboard. However, that one had sunk into the ground with the force of its landing. This one had not been so graceful. Instead of landing like a true bird, it had acted as if it had forgotten its legs. The space bird had careened straight through the towering trees that had guarded this Sharpclaw village for longer than the leader could remember. In one fell swoop, this cursed bird had smashed through countless trees and dug up more dirt than his tribe could move in three days. As such, his tribe was more than inclined to reap the benefits and search the bird's carcass, as it had so grievously wronged them.<p>

As he looked on, several of his more nimble warriors had already climbed atop the bird's body and had started banging on its metal armor, hoping to find a crack and plunder the treasure within. While they labored, several of his larger troops began to ascend, bearing tools more suited for breaking metal. The larger warriors wielded several maces and hammers, weapons designed to use blunt force that relied on the warrior's strength, not the sharpness of the blade. When they reached the top of the bird (I _really_ want to start calling it a ship), a loud cacophony of banging and smashing began. The noise irritated the leader slightly, but he ignored it. He was

determined to see what this space bird held. The other had given them edible prisoners and alien weaponry, and this one could possibly yield similar bounty.

A commotion atop the bird caught the leader's attention, and he looked up, as did several other Sharpclaw. A Sharpclaw youth, one who had yet to earn his own set of armor in the Trials, had found an opening. He peered in, and hissed a warning at something inside. The tribe leader's eyes widened as the youth was hit in the nose by a foot. It happened quickly, sending the young Sharpclaw flying off of the space bird. The foot retracted quickly, but the leader still caught the blur of blue. A survivor within the space bird was fighting back! He growled, and pointed at the opening with a commanding snarl. The other tribesmen caught on to his order and began scrambling toward the gaping hole in the space bird's top. Another kick sent a second warrior falling to the dirt, and the leader began to get concerned.

He hissed another command, and one of the larger Sharpclaw began climbing the bird from the opposite direction. Despite his size, this warrior was being perfectly silent. He reached the area surrounding the hole, and motioned for one of the smaller Sharpclaw to attack. The little one obliged, and pounced on the opening. He was rapped across the snout by what looked like a golden staff, then pushed off the side. He had provided ample distraction, however, and the large Sharpclaw reached in and grasped the resisting warrior's arms. The person inside the bird struggled, but was no match for the Sharpclaw's superior strength.

The warrior was about to haul the mysterious fighter out, when a snap in the forest behind the leader caught all of their attention. The leader whirled about, his eyes wide and searching for any danger. All that greeted his gaze was a few trees and some boulders, nothing spectacular. The noise did, however, bring some sense to him. They had left the village too long, and it was unprotected. Running off with every villager save the eggs in nursery hut had its drawbacks, and the leader recognized his error in judgment. He turned to see the assailant that had so valiantly fended off his troops for so long. To his surprise and annoyance, whoever the warrior had caught had apparently given him a good kick and scampered off, as there were only Sharpclaw in the clearing and the brute that had caught the mysterious warrior lay on the ground next to the space bird.

The leader growled in irritation and snarled an order. Several of the Sharpclaw still on the ground came to his side. He jerked his head towards the village, and together they began the trek back home. The others on the space bird would search its belly and return with anything useful. As for the mysterious warrior... they would catch it eventually. Nothing ever escaped his tribe for long.

* * *

><p>Jorge cursed silently as only half of the lizards began to leave. The tall red one was obviously the one in charge, judging by his demeanor and the way he ordered the others around. Thankfully, that meant he wouldn't be around when Jorge neutralized his soldiers. And by 'neutralize', that meant beat them to a pulp if they tried anything. Jorge was hesitant about using ammo period, as they were a long way from any resupply station. He was perfectly capable of beating them down himself, but the marines weren't so lucky. They may

have been trained to fire a weapon and pilot a ship, but Jorge doubted jujitsu would work against these dinosaurs. With that thought in mind, he turned to Murphy, who was hiding in the tree above him. He keyed his radio, since speaking aloud would draw attention.

"I'm leaving the Vulcan here. Cover me if they get too close, but use single shots. We only have so much ammo." Jorge said as he set his heavy machine gun down on the mossy forest floor. Murphy nodded to him, and Jorge barely heard the subtle click that accompanied the change from fully automatic fire to semi-automatic fire. Murphy would be conserving ammo, but there was very little chance that Jorge would be swarmed. With everything sorted out, Jorge jumped down the embankment, surprising the lizards below. Several of the brutes had started to follow the original occupant, but decided that the huge Spartan was a better target. Granted, it probably wasn't the worst judgment call in their lives, but it definitely rated in the top five. Jorge made a note to remind them of that.

The lizards weren't very diplomatic at his appearance. One of the smaller ones just charged him, raising its sword menacingly. Jorge rolled his eyes and stood perfectly still. The lizard reached him and brought its sword down on his shoulder, but his shield flared and blocked the strike. On his HUD, the energy meter for his shield dropped a whopping five percent. This would be child's play.

As the small dinosaur looked from Jorge to its sword in confusion, Jorge chuckled. He reached forward and grabbed the lizard by its long neck and hoisted it into the air. The little dinosaur choked and hissed, and Jorge noticed the others were inching closer. As they crept nearer, one of Chief Mendez's tips popped into Jorge's head: _If you're looking to intimidate, make an example. And make sure its flashy enough to make one or two shit themselves._ Of course, Mendez had said that about fighting Insurrectionists, not these dinosaurs, but it would probably have the same result. (Ladies and gents, this beatdown is going to be rated M for blood and sadistic action)

Jorge looked down at the lizard in his grasp and grabbed its tail with his other hand. He rotated it to where it was held horizontally across his chest, then brought its back down onto his knee, nearly wrapping the poor dino's spine around his leg. The creature let out a loud shriek, then went limp in his arms. He tossed it aside dismissively, and every dino around him took a cautionary step back. He smirked at their newfound caution, but disregarded when another, larger native decided that aggression superseded fear and attacked. It was a green, heavy brute, standing six foot tall. It was still a foot or so shorter than Jorge, but apparently the axe in his hands made him feel bigger. The lizard swung its axe overhead, ridiculously similar to the failed attack that his smaller, deceased counterpart. Instead of letting this one hit his shields, however, Jorge caught the axe just under the head. The dino was shocked that Jorge could stop his strike, and stood there staring stupidly as Jorge cocked his fist. The Spartan punched his opponent right in the gut, and he felt several floating ribs not just crack, but shatter. The lizard's air rushed out of him, and the resulting choked gasp sprayed blood onto Jorge's faceplate. The dino doubled over Jorge's fist and released his grasp on his own axe. Jorge slid his hand down to grasp the handle of the axe and tossed it to his left, embedding it into another large native's skull. He then sent his knee into the snout of his current opponent, snapping it's head back up and making it

stumble backwards. Jorge followed through with two more lightning quick punches to its chest, then grabbed it by the collar of its breastplate and picked it up over his head. He continued his arc and slammed the dinosaur into the ground head first, snapping its neck. He delivered a kick to the corpse and sent it flying into a group of lizards that had clustered up near the crashed ship.

His motion sensor pinged, and Jorge turned to halt two more overhead axe blows from a couple of five foot tall lizards. He jerked the axes out of the natives' hands and brought them down on their owners heads, splitting their skulls and exposing brain matter. The two fell dead at his feet, gurgling and twitching as their nerves continued to fire randomly. Jorge snorted at their pathetic attempts to flank him. He had fought Grunts with better melee training than this.

A blue native came at him from the ship, only this time it went low, trying to slash Jorge's legs off with its primitive axe. The Spartan easily jumped over the swipe, and landed on the lizard's head. This drove the dinosaur into the ground, and Jorge made sure he wouldn't get up by reaching down and grasping the dinosaur's head, then wrenching it to the left. An audible crack pierced the air, and the lizard remained motionless. _At least they have some sense of imagination,_ Jorge mused.

A snarl to his left announced another attack, but this time there were four. The two remaining large dinosaurs followed behind two little ones. The smaller ones split off just before they reached him, causing Jorge to take his focus off of the two brutes meters away. He shot his foot out in a sweep, tripping one of the smaller dinosaurs. He grabbed it by the tail and swung it around, clobbering the other short dino in the process. Jorge threw both of them on the ground and kicked them away, just in time to be tackled by the two larger dinos. While they couldn't take him to the ground, both of their weight and strength combined made Jorge's shield flare and drop to ten percent, and knocked him off balance. He skidded backward as they continued to push, and he was slammed into the hull of the ship. The sudden stop surprised Jorge and knocked the breath out of him, as well as dispersing his shield momentarily. One of the lizards reared back with its axe while the held Jorge in place, pinning his arms to his sides. Jorge watched the wicked axe come towards him, and immediately regretted not bringing his Vulcan. If the axe hit, it would probably rupture or dent his armor, not to mention hurt. He wouldn't be able to function properly if his armor was disabled in any way.

A sharp crack rang out, and Jorge's worries about his armor's integrity vanished as a neat round hole appeared in the side of the axe-bearing native's head. Murphy had been on the ball after all, it seemed. The native stood for a moment, as if in shock, then toppled to the ground dead. Its partner turned to look, and Jorge used the distraction to break out of its hold. He grabbed the dinosaur's head with both hands and squeezed. The native began to shriek in pain as Jorge's monster strength fractured his skull. Jorge knew that he didn't have the strength to fully crush its head, so he let the lizard fall back. Its dazed and pained expression told him it wouldn't get up for a while, but decided that it deserved more for nearly getting him killed. So Jorge grabbed its ankle and heaved, pulling it over his head and slamming it into the ship it had run him into just seconds prior. He heard another crack, and looked up to see a copious amount of blood splattered onto the ship's hull. The lizard slumped to the ground lifelessly, and he released its ankle.

Another shot from Murphy's assault rifle dropped a small lizard standing on top of the ship, caused it to topple off and land in the grass. Jorge looked around at the three surviving dinos, and was pleasantly surprised to see them retreating into the jungle. Odds were they wouldn't bother the UNSC troops again, though the village's proximity to the corvette made it a dangerous variable. Jorge waved at where Murphy had been hiding, then turned to look at the crashed ship.

If he hadn't know that it had crashed, he never would have recognized the object before him a space-faring vessel. There were no wings, landings struts, or any kind of propulsion system, and altogether had none of the traits that marked a space-worthy ship. Unfortunately, as he looked around the other side, it had been a ship... until it had decided to land in the fashion it had. A kilometer long trail led through the dense foliage, with a deep rut from where whoever had piloted this ill-fated ship had crash landed. Debris littered the trench that had been dug into the ground, and everything from what looked like a wing to what he suspected was the energy core itself had separated from the ship and had been scattered all over the area.

Speaking of the pilot... Jorge thought, and looked all around. He and Murphy had arrived after the pilot had escaped, if the floored lizard earlier was anything to judge by. Whoever it was must have left in a hurry, and Jorge decided to take advantage of that. He scaled the hull of the ship quickly, using the dings and rents in the metal and hand and footholds. He reached the top to find the hatch that the dinosaur natives had been so interested in, and was surprised to find nothing inside. Then again, it was simply a door. He spotted a red switch on the interior and pressed it, but nothing happened. He frowned, and tried it again. The door remained stubbornly shut, and Jorge shook his head. If the big lizards weren't able to crack it, he wasn't about to waste an hour to find he couldn't either. Jorge looked back down to see Murphy going around and looking at the bodies. The Sabre pilot seemed fascinated with the way Jorge had demolished the first big dinosaur. Jorge was about to join him when something glinted on the other side of the ship. Jorge looked down, and the object glinted in the dying sunlight once more. Curious, he jumped down onto the side of the ship, landing with grace one wouldn't expect for someone of his size. Jorge stood up and walked up the small object. There, lying in the dirt, was a golden rod or handle, ornately decorated with symbols and carvings. Jorge bent down and picked it up, and was surprised to find it very light. He traced his fingers over the designs in wonder, and held it horizontally so he could get a better look at it. To his surprise, the two ends of the object shot outward, extending it into a four foot long staff. Jorge was shocked and amazed to find such an object.

It's definitely well crafted, I haven't seen anything so beautiful, or work so smoothly. Jorge thought in wonder. He gave the staff a test whirl, spinning it with his wrist. It flowed with his movement and stopped instantly when his wrist reached the limit of its axis. It was light, durable, and looked like something out of an old Indiana Jones movie. That made it definitely worth keeping. Jorge held it horizontally once more, and was pleasantly surprised when it returned to its original foot long state with a sliding noise. He brought it down to the mag strap on his thigh, and the staff stuck to

it firmly. Satisfied with his findings, and sure that he wouldn't be able to crack the ship without some serious explosive hardware, Jorge decided that they had investigated enough. Night was approaching, and he still needed to check the corvette to see if any of their supplies survived the crash. He turned to walk around to the other side, but stopped when he got an odd feeling. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and he suddenly felt uneasy. He was being watched. Jorge looked around at the surrounding jungle, but nothing came to his eye. He knew perfectly well that any true inhabitant to this planet could easily camouflage itself and hide in plain sight. His motion tracker showed no movement, but the eyes on him made him uneasy. _Time to go,_ Jorge thought. He walked quickly around to the other side of the ship. He collected his Vulcan and Murphy, and together the two moved back towards the corvette. All the while, Jorge felt those same eyes upon him, and every now and then a white blip would appear on his motion tracker. Jorge wasn't too worried, but he wanted to get back even more now that he realized one simple fact: they were being followed.

* * *

><p>AJ huffed and puffed as he hauled Jenkins into the bridge, grunting with effort at his fellow pilot's weight. He gently set Jenkins down, then looked back outside. The orange light of the dying sun told him night was fast approaching, and he grew worried. It had been two hours since he had last heard from Jorge and Murphy. He knew the Spartan and marine could handle themselves, but darkness always brought problems of a different sort. He looked at the ladder with uncertainty, then back at Jenkins. The other pilot had fallen unconscious about fifteen minutes ago, leaving AJ to drag his New York ass all the way up the ladder alone. To hell with it, AJ thought. If Jorge and Murphy were to come back, he could simply lower the ladder again.

AJ walked over to the viewport and pulled on the ladder. It came off the ground easily, and he slowly drew it back into the ship, leaving no foreseeable way into the ship. He reminded himself to check the rest of the ship later as he set the ladder down next to the viewport. That done, AJ reached behind him to grasp the MA5B Assault Rifle and activated it, linking the weapon with his HUD and showing the ammo counter. The rifle had twenty-two rounds left after its last use, which meant that it was Murphy's rifle. One thing Murphy had always done in their cross training on Reach was leave his rifle with half empty clips. He said that it made reloading easier, because he always knew that his next clip would be full, not some five round empty that he had stashed instead of throwing away. AJ left the rifle as it was, and decided he would just trade with the older marine later. Between his radio discipline and his ammo behavior, Murphy was definitely the quirkiest of the three, though that wasn't a bad thing.

Wait a minute... radio! I could just call them up and see how things are going. AJ slapped himself on the front of his helmet because he hadn't thought of that sooner. He raised his hand to the side of his helmet and keyed the mic. A burst of static filled his ears as the helmet searched the frequencies for Jorge and Murphy's IFF transponders. When it locked onto their signal, the static cut away, and was replaced with silence. Satisfied, AJ hit the transmit button, and the panting and grunting of two running soldiers came to his ears.

"Murphy, Spartan 052, do you copy?" It wasn't what he wanted to say, but he still had to follow radio protocol. It was the basic start to a radio conversation. Sure enough, Jorge responded, albeit he sounded a little out of breath.

"This is Jorge. We read you, AJ." The Spartan replied. He sounded uneasy, if his tone was anything to judge. AJ had no time to examine the Spartan's voice patterns before the radio came alive again.

"Hey there, AJ. It's a pity you had to carry Jenkins back, because you missed out on some fun." That was Murphy's usual banter, so AJ knew things were alright with them. He chuckled at Murphy's transmission, then hit the button again.

"Did you guys have any luck on that ship?"

There was silence as they slowed their breaths, as if they were being sneaky. Odds were, they were avoiding a local patrol, or perhaps the village itself. Either way, it meant that they were close. The silence last for a few minutes, in which AJ sat down next to the viewport. He looked to his left and spotted Jenkins' blood-drenched helmet, and picked it up. He examined it while Jorge and Murphy did their sneaky routine, and rolled it over toward where Jenkins sat. The helmet ran up onto the lieutenant's now bandaged side, and Jenkins stirred. Still, he didn't wake, something AJ didn't worry too much about. Jenkins was just tired from the blood loss, and would probably be out for another hour or so. The radio crackled, and AJ brought his hand back up to his helmet.

"Yes, actually. I found a staff of some sort. I'll let you look at it when we get back. It's quite an interesting little treasure." Jorge said, before going quiet again. AJ waited a few moments, then hit the button again.

"When you guys get here, call up first. I've pulled the ladder up so we don't get any nasty surprises." He heard nothing as the other two began running again, until Jorge came back again. This time, his voice echoed of annoyance and worry.

"Good thinking, pilot. Because I believe we're going to be having company." AJ's eyes widened as he said this. _"Whoever it is has been following us since we left the ship."_ AJ heard Murphy stop panting, which meant he'd either stopped or gone off radio. Odds were, this was the first time he'd heard that he and Jorge were being tailed. The silence became tense, and AJ glanced back out into the jungle. Far away, the sun was just starting to set behind the mountains in the distance. Darkness was approaching fast, and they need to get back to the ship.

"AJ, lower the ladder. We're coming up on the ship." Jorge said over the radio. AJ jumped up quickly and ran over to the ladder. He picked it up and pointed it towards the window. He walked forward, lowering it outside as walked. He felt a solid thump through the ladder, and let it sit up against the viewport. Just as he was dusting off his hands, Jorge and Murphy appeared on the trail. He waved at them, then turned to check on Jenkins. The man's bandages on his side were still white, which meant that the bleeding had stopped. AJ shook Jenkins' shoulder, but the man just mumbled under his breath

and continued to sleep. AJ rolled his eyes. A clanking noise behind him made AJ turn, and he was pleased to see Murphy's helmeted face appear at the viewport. The older pilot quickly clambered into ship, followed shortly by Jorge. The Spartan hoisted the ladder back up into the ship, then looked around. AJ cocked his head in curiosity, until he saw Jorge walk over to the side of the viewport. There, hidden cleverly by the curve of the wall, was a hidden control, with its holographic glyph still glowing weakly. Jorge tapped the control, and a pair of heavy blast doors closed over the windows, shutting out the sunlight and leaving only the faint purple interior glow of all Covenant ships.

Jorge watched his motion sensor with interest, but their pursuer had either given up or had yet to enter within twenty five meters. He sighed heavily, and removed his helmet, glad to be out of it. He set the helmet down on one of the desks, then reached down to his thigh. He pulled the staff off of his leg and handed it to AJ, who stared at it in wonder.

"How's Jenkins?" Jorge asked, his gaze traveling over to where said pilot sat unconscious. AJ looked away from the staff in his grasp and back at Jorge.

"He's lost a bit of blood, but I could only find the cut. While it may be deep, none of the major plumbing got hit. He just needs some rest, and he'll be better in a few days, tops." AJ replied, returning his gaze to the weapon in his hand. Jorge nodded, relieved.

Murphy walked towards the rear of the bridge, where the exit door was. He tapped it, and it slowly slid upward, exposing nothing but darkness. Apparently, power was going to be a luxury even within the ship.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm anxious to see if we can go find some more weapons. I've got nothing against assault rifles, but I'm craving something with a little more spice, if you catch my drift." Murphy said, then gestured toward the door. Jorge put his helmet back on and turned on the flashlight, illuminating the passageway. It wasn't that far to the hangar, if everything was still intact. And with the viewports blocked, they would need to find an alternate exit anyway.

"We'll search the Pelican and the hangar for any supplies, but after that we have to hit the rack. I don't want those dinosaurs sneaking up on us because we're too tired to pay attention." Jorge said sternly. AJ and Murphy nodded emphatically, and all three of them moved into the hallway, leaving Jenkins behind in his slumber.

* * *

><p>If Krystal were that kind of person, she would have cursed when the giant armored warrior picked up her staff. In her haste to escape the Sharpclaw (at least that's what they called themselves, according to the minds she had read), she had dropped the precious weapon. She had been so amazed by the combat prowess of the huge Spartan (again, mind reader) that she had forgotten to retrieve it. And when this 'Jorge' had led the other human (Murphy, if she had heard right) back to their ship, he had somehow known that she was there, following them as they ran. One thing Krystal had been proud of on Cerinia was that she was heralded as the most silent Guardian to ever take the

trials. She had been too far away to delve more deeply into his thoughts, only catching his surface feelings. One thing was certain, however. She would have no chance in a fight with him, armed or not. The man had been raised expressly for war, and he could probably defeat four or five Guardians without too much trouble.<p>

That is, if there were any left, Krystal thought morosely. But the blue vixen had done enough mourning in the long journey from her now shattered home planet. As she sat outside the huge ship, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of loneliness fight back through her mind. But she dismissed it quickly, focusing instead on how she were to enter the large, submerged vessel.

The Cerinian worked around the edge of the large ship, until she found what used to be a hangar. Debris littered the area near the hangar, and a strange plane or ship of some sort lay on its side. Krystal spotted several of the weapons she had seen the smaller human use earlier scattered among the rocks, as well as several weapons of a different sort. Still, the only thing she would use was her staff, which was now in the possession of that armored giant of a human. If she would have any chance of answering the distress call she had heard, Krystal would need her staff. And she very much doubted that the man she had seen demolish a platoon of Sharpclaw, without breaking a sweat, would just hand over the staff if she asked nicely.

Krystal slipped into the hangar silently, ignoring the alien designs and colors in favor of finding shelter. The crash, along with the long flight beforehand, had left her tired beyond anything. It probably wasn't the smartest idea to sleep right under the enemy's nose, but she had a sinking feeling that sleeping in a tree would be out of the question on this planet; odds were that several predators could reach them. And so, she found a small alcove next to a strange container of sorts, and laid her head down on top of a suitcase of some sort. Krystal slowly fell into a fitful slumber, one that would give her the rest she would need for the next days trials.

* * *

><p>I've had a couple of reviews so far, which makes me very proud. A category with only ten stories doesn't get much traffic I'm sure, but I'm also glad to know that those who do read are die-hard fans, just like me! I must explain however that I'm not using the branch of Marines in this story, but rather using the word to describe these pilot's jobs. At the beginning of the corvette portion of the level, Noble Six is accompanied by the Sabre pilots that had assisted him in the battle. When I say marines, I'm referring to the way that pilots have been cross-trained to act as soldiers as well, not just to fly. They are fully capable of surviving and excelling in a combat situation. Sorry for any confusion.<p>

3. T-Rex Welcome Party

It seems that, even though this category has very few (and very poor) stories, mine has garnered a decent amount of attention! I'm glad you readers are taking an interest, and Jorge's Tale is an excellent way for me to dodge around the writer's block on my other two stories. Thanks for following, now let's see how different my Sauria is from the one on Adventures. Mwahahaha...

* * *

><p>Jorge stomped down the hallway that lead from the bridge to the hangar, his flashlight the only thing illuminating the corridor. His swinging gait made the white beam of light jump and dash across the subdued surfaces of the ships interior, bathing everything in the distance in a light pink. It gave the hallway an organic look, like the inside of a stomach, minus the moisture. The completely alien feeling weighed upon Jorge's tired mind like a ton of bricks. The day's events had left him feeling drained, and his thought grew sluggish and thick as he trudged down the dark hall. Jorge even felt his eyelids droop, but he shook his head and blinked rapidly.<p>

I can't afford to sleep until I know the ship is secure, Jorge told himself mentally. He knew the dangers of falling asleep in an insecure area. Countless marines had died of slit throats from the invisible Spec Ops Elites, who chose to prowl at night through the camps. Jorge had seen a man get up to go to the john, only to be cut in half as soon as his zipper came down. And with the ship in such a damaged state, he could hardly afford to just fall asleep without locking down. The matter was exacerbated by the uncomfortable fact that the locals had already invaded once, and had more than ample motive to do it again. The next time, however, they would most likely come to kill.

Jorge reached the door that led to the hangar " their most likely breach " and waited for the door to slide open automatically. He waited several seconds, then breathed a long, troubled sigh. The power to the doors had been lost, apparently. He reached down and punched into the center of the door. The locking mechanism bent inward, but did not release the door. He hit it again, and the lock groaned in protest. A final punch sent his arm all the way through to the other side, puncturing the lock completely. His armored gauntlets protected his hands from damage, but it still hurt slightly to punch through a door. Jorge inserted another hand and set his shoulders, then began to the open the door by spreading it apart. The panels slid into their respective slots in the frame of the door smoothly, and Jorge was a granted a new, if slightly dark, view of the hangar bay. His assumption had been spot on: it was nowhere near secure.

The two opposite ends of the bay had once been blocked off by a force field barrier that had kept the vacuum of space outside of the ship. When they had landed, however, the impact must have destroyed most of the connections to the core or done some kind of damage that would cause them to fail.. As such, the shields that had kept the hangar secure were deactivated, leaving two walls completely removed from the gigantic room. And the Pelican was nowhere to be found.

"Ah, hell..." Jorge cursed under his breath. There was no possible way they would be able to secure the ship now. They wouldn't be able to plug both doors with three Pelicans, let alone one. The trees outside were massive, but the effort it would take to shore up the two hangar bay doors would be better spent building a village of their own. Not that they had the tools or the time for that. Jorge slowly trudged forward, leaving the door gaping open. With their current situation, one small door wouldn't stand up against a dinosaur raiding party, anyway. He slowly walked down the ramp of the dark hangar, casting his flashlight over the area. Several of the

weapon crates he had hauled out of the Pelican were scattered everywhere, though they were closed and probably still had their contents. The Covenant weapon crates, however, had lost everything. Covenant weaponry littered the area, all over the floor and the walls. Plasma rifles, plasma repeaters, energy swords "all kinds of alien weaponry lay scattered in the darkness, shining brightly whenever Jorge's flashlight fell upon them. He had read up on Covenant weapons under Deja, the smart AI that had guided the Spartan-IIs all through their training. They used plasma bolts that superheated whatever they touched, but using such volatile ammunition had one major drawback: power drain. The weapons held a decent amount of power, to be sure, but unless they were stored in very cold temperatures, the batteries would lose charge. Considering the lack of power, Jorge very much doubted they could put all of these Covenant guns in a fridge. If his memory served him right, they had approximately a week before every Covenant weapon "except the Energy Sword, curiously enough " would be as dangerous as a paperweight. And then, it would be blades and bullets once more.

Jorge cast his light toward the bay door to his right, and the beam of light revealed the familiar olive drab paint of the Pelican. He sighed in relief, and began walking over towards the downed airship. It could no longer function, but there were critical supplies within, like MRE boxes and medical kits. Not to mention it was one of the few familiar things on this alien planet. The Sabre pilots (now lounging back in the pseudo dark of the bridge on the complaint that they were 'tired'. They'd been knocked unconscious for half of the morning!) were familiar enough, but Jorge missed his team. It felt like he wasn't all there, at least mentally. He could no longer hear Emile's snide remarks, or Kat's jabs at Jun or Carter. As for Six... the man had been an enigma. Jorge had never gotten past his barrier that he put between himself and the team. Carter may have told the newest member of Noble that the lone wolf stuff was behind him, but Jorge knew better " the guy had been solo from the start.

Jorge reached the hangar bay door, and looked out into the darkness. A full moon had graced the planet, and everything was bathed in an eerie glow. It felt surreal, like he had accidentally fallen asleep but didn't realize it. Jorge looked around, his flashlight playing across the wrecked hangar, and spotted a dented med kit over near a Covenant weapon crate. Remembering Jenkins' wound, Jorge figured that holing up for one more night wouldn't hurt too bad. He would just have to leave his motion tracker on, and set it to ping anything that approached. The giant Spartan walked over to the med kit and picked it up, hefting its weight. It felt just like any other med kit, and he opened it up to examine its contents. He found a standard amount of bandages, morphine, antibiotics, and other medical supplies, all in good condition. Satisfied, Jorge closed the kit and began to make his way back to the bridge.

Blip.

Jorge stopped, his eyes locked onto his motion sensor. When they had been followed back to the ship, Jorge had marked the inconsistent contact that had tracked them. Whenever that contact showed up, it would pop up red. And a red blip just alerted on Jorge's sensor. Even worse, it had come from the area behind the crate where he had found the med kit. Whatever had followed them had been within striking distance, and he hadn't even noticed. _Damn it, I'm losing it!_ He

mentally berated himself as he swiftly, yet silently made his way back to the weapon rack. Drawing the knife from its sheath on his collar, Jorge slowly looked over the crate, ready to strike down any attack...

* * *

><p>Krystal squinted as a harsh light flew across her face, the bright light stabbing through her eyelids and rousing her from slumber. The Cerinian flinched, but the light passed away from her face before she opened her eyes. When she did, absolute darkness greeted her vision, her eyes not yet adjusted. Krystal's ears perked up at the sound of heavy footsteps moving around. That, coupled with the fact that she couldn't see anything sent a spike of fear through the Guardian, and all traces of drowsiness fled her mind. Krystal felt panic begin to rise within her, but she stubbornly quelled it as her Guardian instincts kicked in. She felt the mind of the large human she had followed earlier approaching, and could hear his heavy footsteps. With nothing else available, Krystal curled up in a tight ball and waited, ignoring her quickening pulse and instead focusing on the human's mind. She entered his mind quite easily, which meant that he was no telepath himself. The area surrounding Krystal became lighter when the human walked towards it, but Krystal was hidden in the shadow of the weapon rack. Through his eyes, Krystal watched this 'Jorge' bend over and pick up what looked like some sort of medical container. As the gargantuan human examined the contents of his medical kit, Krystal cautiously wandered his mind, in search of his memories. He had been the one to take her staff, yet by feeling the air she knew it was no longer on his person. She could only look through his most recent memories, because a more thorough search would raise his suspicion, regardless of whether or not he was telepathic. Krystal examined his memories carefully, and happened upon a memory of where he handed the bald human " the characteristics of their race shocked Krystal to no small end " her staff. To the best of Jorge's knowledge, the bald one still had her staff.<p>

Now, I just have to wait until he... there he goes now. Krystal thought as she felt Jorge begin to head back to the bridge. The light illuminating her corner of the hangar went with him, cloaking the Cerinian in darkness once more. Still monitoring Jorge's surface thoughts, Krystal stood up, ready to sneak into the bridge and reclaim her staff. Her planning was halted, however, when the armored man stopped as well. He turned his head as if to look behind him, then turned around and began moving back toward her. Cold fear and confusion welled up within the young Cerinian as Jorge came back quickly. There was no way he could have heard her; she hadn't even made a sound! She crouched back down behind the crate, limbs tense and body ready to fight or run. To her horror, whatever the human had used to find her had been spot on, and she felt the crate she hid behind move and tremble as a large armored hand grasped the edge, slowly pulling the huge super soldier up over the top to look. Krystal squinted as the harsh light of his flashlight stabbed into her eyes once more, only this time Krystal _knew_ he was looking right at her. In the shade of the bright light, she spotted a blade of some sort clutched in his iron grip. So preoccupied with the knife was she, that she didn't notice his other hand come around and grasp her by the scruff of her neck. Krystal gasped in surprise as she was hauled out from behind the crate, her feet dangling off the floor. The large human pulled her towards him, then slammed the Cerinian

into the ground with enough force to knock the breath from her lungs. While she was stunned, the human shifted his grip to her throat. Krystal's vision went blurry for a second, and she desperately tried to get air back into her lungs. The knife flashed in Jorge's light, and suddenly cold metal parted the fur on Krystal's throat, just above his thumb. A look of shock and fear crossed the Cerinian's face, and she looked up directly into the Spartan's mirrored faceplate. She saw no human visage, only her own scared face staring right back at her.

"Any last words before I end it here?" The human asked. Krystal could tell by his thoughts that he had meant it to be a rhetorical question, but she decided to humor him. There wasn't really a chance of overpowering a guy who had thrown a Sharpclaw brute around like a plush toy.

"If it makes a difference, I'd like to say that your flashlight is a little bright." She gasped out, clutching at the hand around her neck. Jorge's grip faltered in strength at her words, and he reeled back slightly in surprise. His knife came away as well, and glorious air was allowed back into the vixen's lungs once more.

"You can speak! And in our language, no less!" Jorge said incredulously. He should have realized it sooner, since she had been flying a space ship. Someone capable of flying a spacecraft had to be able to speak, but that she could speak English was a wild card. But what was she doing on his ship?

"Yes, but it is difficult to do so without air." She said weakly, and poked his armored forearm as well. Jorge released her, but kept his knife handy just in case she decided to try anything suspicious. Just because she was civilized didn't mean she wasn't hostile. Krystal massaged her neck where he had grabbed her, and held up her other hand against the harsh artificial light still shining in her eyes.

"And as I said, your flashlight is a little bright." She spoke more smoothly this time, speech unhindered by a constricted throat. Jorge dimmed his light to a more acceptable level, and she let her hand fall to the side. Jorge stood up and gave her some space, though he dared not stray too far.

"And what reason brings you to our humble abode? You're lucky you weren't a dinosaur, or I'd have cut your throat and left you for the scavengers." Jorge said gruffly. Krystal shivered at the memory of the blade to her neck, but she pushed past it with no trouble. Fortitude was one of the few upsides to seeing everyone you love die; if you didn't go crazy with grief, it would make you much stronger in character. Not that she wished that fate upon anyone. With a sigh of relief, Krystal stood up as well, eyeing the blade still clutched in Jorge's hand. He felt her gaze on his knife, but made no effort to put it back into its sheath.

"Could you please put that away? You have my word as a Guardian that I shall not run away." She said in exasperation. She sensed his hesitation, but Jorge reluctantly sheathed the knife, though his hand still rested on its handle.

"Guardian of what, exactly? I've got no good reason to trust you right now. You snuck onto our ship and hid among the cargo. Not

exactly the actions of an honest person." He said with suspicion.

"I couldn't exactly walk right up to you and proclaim, 'Here I am, don't shoot' now, could I?" The vixen replied. Jorge considered her words, and admitted that she had a point. His hand fell from the hilt of his knife as he sighed and extended it toward the Cerinian.

"My name's Jorge. Spartan-052 at your service." He said in a much more friendly tone. Krystal looked down at his hand hesitantly, but then grasped it with her own a second later.

"Krystal. Former Guardian of the Haleth family, and Cerinian council member." She said, feeling pride color her voice. It was an empty, almost false pride, but she could still find honor in what she had achieved on her home planet before it had suffered its violent end. Jorge seemed impressed at the titles, and his memory flashed back to the staff he had found.

"I don't suppose you're after that little golden candlestick I found earlier?" He asked, humor evident in his interrogative.

"As a matter of fact, that's why I followed you. A Guardian is a very small threat without her staff."

"I assumed as much. It's back in the bridge with my men. Come with me and we'll--"

A commotion in the jungle outside cut Jorge off, and both he and Krystal turned to look out into the moonlit night. The trees near the Pelican had begun to shake, and they could hear branches crashing and snapping behind them. Jorge expanded his motion sensor range from twenty five to one hundred meters. What he found afterward was a VERY large contact moving toward them. Krystal could also sense something coming their way, though it was too far for her to get a good read on.

Before the Spartan could say anything, the trees parted to reveal a large, lizard-like head. Both space-faring warriors froze as the body, small forearms, powerful hind legs, and long tail followed the creature. It was mottled brown, if Jorge's eyes weren't deceiving him, and covered in thick, pebbly skin. Faded white teeth glinted in the moon's light, and two beady eyes stared right at Jorge and Krystal. It was roughly fifteen meters tall (forty-five feet), and probably twice as long. Jorge's mind flashed back to their lessons with Deja, back on Reach, when they had temporarily studied archaeology. The creature staring intently at him and the vixen now hiding behind him was none other than the Tyrannosaurus Rex, the king of the dinosaurs. And if he were to judge by the saliva dripping from its huge mouth, Jorge could accurately guess that it was hungry.

* * *

><p>The beauty of dreams were that anything could happen in them. The person having a dream was in total control, a feeling that was seldom felt in the cold, unfeeling reality of the real world. And the dream Jenkins was enjoying made this abundantly clear, as he was nowhere near the screwed up planet that he and the other soldiers had crash landed upon. Instead, he found himself playing in an immense stadium, filled with thousands of cheering fans roaring in the stands. Several

huge lights illuminated the entire field, and he was standing proudly at the plate of the Galactic League World Series. The pitcher leaned forward, silently debating with the catcher behind Jenkins about what pitch to throw. Behind the pitcher, Jenkins could see the scoreboard: tie game, with two outs at the bottom of the ninth inning. It was up to Jenkins to bring home the series.<p>

The pitcher stood up, certain in the pitch he was about to throw. He wound up, and Jenkins tensed, his bat at the ready. The pitcher hurled the baseball straight towards Jenkins, a white blur streaking towards him. Jenkins tracked the ball, and watched as it veered to the outside. He didn't swing, and it burned past him into the glove of the catcher. Instead of hearing, "Ball!" from the umpire, the man shouted Jenkins' name. The man frowned, looked back at the umpire, but said official was already hunched and ready for the next pitch. Jenkins blinked, then shrugged and brought his bat back to its ready position. The pitcher wound up again, but just before he released the ball, another shout came into his ear, "JENKINS!"

Alarmed, the Sabre pilot swung low, but even though the bat passed under the ball, he felt his swing connect with something. All of a sudden, the world around him went dark, and the stadium disappeared.

"You little fucker! Argh, dammit!"

Jenkins opened his eyes groggily, and was confused to see Murphy doubled over in pain, hands cupped to his groin. Jenkins blinked in confusion, but realization soon dawned upon him and his puzzled expression dissolved into a wide grin as he started laughing. Jenkins had been so embroiled in his dream that he had clobbered Murphy's gonads when he had been aiming for a baseball. Murphy continued to curse and writhe while Jenkins roared laughter, and he kept laughing until his sides hurt. While he shook with mirth, Jenkins' eyes searched the dimly lit bridge for AJ, but the bald brainiac was nowhere to be found. Jenkins let his laughter die down, though an occasional chuckle still bit past his teeth, and he slowly stood up. He cringed, expecting the stabbing pain of his wound in his side, but felt nothing. Intrigued, the scout looked down at his side, where he had been injured in the crash, and was amazed to find that the bandages were clean. Jenkins went to unwrap them, and was surprised to find the staff Jorge had found clutched firmly in his grasp. He didn't remember picking it up, and no one had handed it to him. Unable to come to a conclusion, Jenkins returned He slowly unwound the cloth, ignoring Murphy as he recovered from the uncalled for "if accidental" shot to the balls.

As the last bandage peeled away, Jenkins got his first look at the wound. Or at least, where the wound used to be. Eyes wide with wonder, Jenkins touched the now flawless skin where his side had been pierced just hours earlier. No trace of pain raced through him, and he poked his side more forcefully. The muscles beneath flexed wonderfully, and there was no scar or anything.

"How in the world..." Jenkins wondered out loud. Out of the corner of his eye, Murphy could be seen using a computer bank to slowly lift himself from the floor, breathing shallowly and groaning in pain. Jenkins ignored him. How in the world had he healed from such a grievous wound in one night? Normally such a wound would put him out for months, but here he was with no trace of blood or broken bone

with eighteen hours of being stabbed through the side. Jenkins' speechless expression turned to realization when his eyes fell on the staff clutched in his right hand. Somehow, he just knew the odd trinket had something to do with his speedy recovery. The scout looked it over again, and was surprised to see that both of the blue jewels set into the opposite ends were glowing dimly, as if lit from the inside. Like magic but real.

Jenkins was snapped out of his musings by a rock hard fist slamming into his face. The scout cried out in both pain and alarm as he was thrown against the sealed viewports. As pain began to throb in his jaw, Jenkins shot an indignant glare at his attacker: Murphy. The elder Sabre pilot ignored his look and threw Jenkins his DMR. The scout caught it deftly, and staggered back to his feet.

"Jorge is in trouble. AJ ran off to help him, and we would be there too if you hadn't tried to knock my balls out of the park," Murphy growled. That instantly quelled Jenkins' rising ire, and he just nodded. The two ran towards the bridge exit, and were soon pounding down the pitch black hallway that Jorge had walked not fifteen minutes earlier. Murphy's helmet light came on automatically, though it lacked the power of Jorge's light. Then again, the MJOLNIR armor carried a miniature reactor within it, so they weren't about to complain.

As they neared the hangar bay, an echoing roar reached their ears. The two Sabre pilots exchanged looks, then pushed onward into the hangar, ignoring the pried door. There, they found AJ standing next to a Covenant weapon rack, staring at some incredible sight ahead. In the darkness of the night, the outside of the ship was lit better by the moon's light than the interior, and it took no large amount of effort to locate the target of his gaze. Another roar rocked the hangar bay as Murphy and Jenkins laid eyes on the great Tyrant King, the Tyrannosaurus Rex. The large dinosaur was currently trying to catch Jorge, a small figure when compared to the large creature. The Spartan kept the surrounding rocks, debris, and sometimes even the Pelican between himself and the hungry carnivore. The T-Rex roared its disapproval at this tactic again and continued chasing the Spartan. As Jorge sprinted around the Pelican to an outcropping of rock near the entrance to the hangar, Jenkins could have sworn he saw a blur of blue running with him. The scout trumped it up to a trick of the moonlight, and jumped as the T-Rex roared again.

Murphy and Jenkins snapped out of their trances and clubbed AJ upside the head simultaneously. The bald marine shook his head, then glanced at both of them frantically. Murphy examined the darkened hangar quickly, his polarized visor lightening slightly as he activated his VISR mode on his helmet. A series of greenish-blue lines began to trace their ways around objects in the hangar, granting the Sabre pilot a weaker version of night vision. And off to the right, thrown from its case during the landing, was a SPNKR rocket launcher, with both tubes loaded from the looks of it. He looked back at the T-Rex and ran the calculations in his head. The animal was large, and would have a super strong skeletal structure to support its gargantuan body. But the payload in the rockets would probably reduce its head or chest into a cloud of red mist. The only problem was that the rockets moved slowly, so they would either have to predict the dinosaur's movements and lead the shot, or they would have to get up close. The second option was more favorable, as Jenkins would be able to get in position quickly enough to take the T-Rex down without

accidentally shooting Jorge. Speaking quickly, he relayed the plan to Jenkins.

The scout nodded, then took off down the ramp, sprinting toward the rocket launcher. The darkness of hangar did little to hinder him as he made his way to the rocket launcher. Soon enough, Jenkins was hefting the second most powerful infantry weapon in the entire UNSC arsenal, with his DMR attached to the mag strip on his back. He waved to Murphy, who responded in kind, then dashed toward the hangar door. AJ and Murphy both marveled at his speed, considering he'd had his side punctured so recently. In their haste to assist Jorge, neither had seen that his wound had been healed. That done, Murphy turned to AJ.

"We need to find a way to get these doors back up. See if you can divert power from the reactor, or any unnecessary systems. If you can't, just work on getting some lights in here." Murphy ordered. AJ nodded intently, then raised an eyebrow.

"What are you gonna do?" Murphy looked towards Jorge, who had taken shelter inside the flipped Pelican.

"I'm gonna go see if Jorge could use an extra hand."

* * *

><p>The night was far too beautiful for Jorge to be dealing with this kind of harassment. Of course, a twenty-five ton dinosaur that wanted to eat him wouldn't exactly stand there and argue about the serenity, so he had to outrun it. And so, the largest Spartan-II to ever graduate from Halsey's program found himself hiding inside of a flipped Pelican, watching the large taloned feet of the Tyrannosaurus pace about angrily. Beside him, panting heavily from the sprinting they had been doing, was Krystal. The Cerinian was in great shape, of that Jorge was sure. But the exertion of running from a large carnivore after not eating anything for the last twenty four hours was starting to get to her.<p>

The T-Rex stuck its large snout into the cargo bay of the Pelican, desperately trying to reach its prey. But Jorge and Krystal had retreated to the relative safety of the cockpit, and the durasteel triple A titanium plating on the Pelican refused to allow the T-Rex any further, a fact that frustrated the dinosaur beyond all measure. The large carnivore roared in anger again, then began pacing around the dropship, trying to find a weakness to exploit. As it circled the Pelican, Jorge could feel the ground tremble with each step. He reached a hand up to try the radio again, but decided against it. He knew that Murphy and the others were outside trying _something_, and to interrupt them would cost them time needed to rescue himself and his smaller comrade. As if to vindicate that thought, a strange humming sound began to permeate the air. Jorge concentrated on it, and was pleased to know that it was coming from the direction of the ship. The thudding around them stopped, and it seemed that the T-Rex had taken an interest in the ship as well. An uncertain growl echoed from somewhere above Jorge's right, and the footfalls of the T-Rex began to move away, toward the corvette. Jorge watched the large blip on his radar leave the immediate area. When it exited twenty-five meters, the Spartan tapped Krystal on the shoulder. The Cerinian looked up into his face plate, and he held up three fingers. He counted down to one, then pointed toward the exit. Together, the two

raced out of the Pelican, then turned to look at the corvette. To both survivors' surprise, the lights inside the hangar were on, throwing purple illumination all over the forest.

Jorge and Krystal exchanged looks, then crept closer. They soon caught sight of the T-Rex, who seemed to be uneasy about the new light. It was unsettled either by the sudden light, or the unknown feeling coming from inside the ship. _AJ must be rerouting power again,_ Jorge realized. This time, a brilliant blue barrier appeared in front of the dinosaur, startling it. The T-Rex took an involuntary step backward, then roared in defiance at the shield. It charged forward, then tilted its head downward at the last moment and rammed the shield. To Jorge's dismay, the shield began to flicker, as did the lights inside of the hangar. The reactor must have been damaged, or the shield would have been back up within seconds. The T-Rex continued to watch with interest as the shield flickered, nearly died, then returned to its original state.

Jorge let loose a sigh of relief, but another contact on his radar caught his attention. It was yellow, marking a friendly IFF transponder. Sure enough, the transponder 'SCOUT' appeared on his HUD, roughly fifteen meters away from the stationary Tyrannosaurus. He heard breathing come over the microphone, then a New York accent.

"Hey, Chucklsaurus Rex!" The scout cried. The T-Rex cocked its head at the sound and then turned, its eyes focused on wherever Jenkins was standing. Jorge heard a safety click off over the radio, and Jenkins' grunt of effort, as if he were lifting something heavy. "Eat me!"

The Tyrannosaurus opened its mouth to loose another roar (or perhaps to fulfill Jenkins' request), but a rocket entered the gaping maw before any sound could escape. A massive explosion filled the clearing, and the Tyrannosaurus' head and neck exploded in a shower of meat and blood, sending gore, bone fragments, and brain matter all over the area. Its decapitated body stumbled forward as if confused by its sudden lack of a head, then fell over with a crash, shaking the ground beneath Jorge and Krystal. A river of dark, viscous blood began to pour from the wound. Over the radio, Jorge heard three voices yelling in triumph, and he chuckled. The marines had pulled through, and it seemed he owed them big time. Beside him, Krystal stared at the huge corpse of the Tyrannosaurus in wonder, then looked back up toward the ship.

"Amazing." Jorge heard her whisper. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear it, but he acted as if he wasn't and made no comment. Instead, he raised the squad channel on his COM.

"You lads certainly pulled us out of the fire there. I owe you one." He said easily. With that, he gestured toward the ship, and Krystal began to lead the way. As he followed her, AJ's uncertain voice answered him.

"Who's we? Did you grow another head or something?" The bald marine asked with a little humor, but Jorge could sense genuine curiosity behind the question. Jorge just shrugged and didn't reply. As they neared the door, the force field dissipated temporarily, allowing them entry. Jorge was about to offer a hand to Krystal, but was surprised when she took the initiative and scaled the three meter

wall that was the lower lip of the hangar. She looked back down at him with a smirk, and he shook his head. He reached up and jumped, grasping the edge and pulling himself up as well. When he stood back up, he turned to find Krystal standing completely still, eyes wide and forward. Jorge followed her gaze to see Murphy standing in front of the Cerinian, his Assault Rifle aimed at her chest. A certain palpable tension hung between the two, and Jorge moved quickly to disarm the situation. He stepped in between the two, blocking Krystal completely from Murphy's sight with his huge frame.

"Cool it, Murphy. She's not a hostile." Jorge said gruffly. Behind him, Krystal relaxed marginally, and breathed a sigh of relief. Murphy, however, did not lower his weapon.

"You said we were followed. The next thing we know, you're playing Ring Around the Rosie with a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and then this little lady comes climbing up into the ship like she owns the world. Excuse me if I'm just a little suspicious." Murphy said quietly. His words angered Jorge, not because he wouldn't lower his weapon, but that he didn't trust Jorge's judgment. That represented a serious flaw in the chain of command, even though Murphy was technically superior to him. Thankfully, though, Jenkins came to the rescue.

The scout hoisted himself up into the hangar bay just as Jorge began to inch closer to Murphy. He was so focused on the two warriors squaring off that he didn't notice Krystal. He ran in between them as quickly as he could, the SPNKR still up on his shoulder.

"Whoa there, fellas. What's with all this crap? Didn't we just take out a T-Rex?" He said jovially, trying to defuse the situation with humor. Neither Jorge nor Murphy looked at him, but the smaller soldier did lower his rifle. Feeling he was making progress, he knocked them both on their helmets, ending their stare down, and grinned slightly.

"When you chuckleheads really wanna go at it, do it when we're not on a dinosaur-infested alien planet, alright?" He watched as the two reluctantly nodded, then finally noticed the blue vixen standing behind Jorge. His ability to mediate fell through the floor, along with his jaw.

"WHOA!"

Krystal winced at his loud volume from so close, and her ears flattened to her head in an attempt to minimize the sound. Jorge and Murphy looked at Jenkins' dumbfounded expression, and shook their heads in unison. Their motor mouth scout had been brought to a halt.

Krystal felt rather uncomfortable at being gawked at, so she hesitantly tried to make conversation. "Hello. My name is Krystal." No response. She tried again. "I can't thank you enough for stopping those two. It would not do to have comrades fighting each other." A tinge of impatience entered the Cerinian as Jenkins still remained mute with that stupified look upon his face, but she was distracted by Jorge reaching up to remove his helmet. She had interacted with him so far by looking into his mirrored faceplate. Now, she would actually get to see his face.

Jorge removed the helmet and automatically set it into the crook of

his right arm. Now unmasked, he let his frown at Murphy's behavior show. Murphy made no move to take off his own helmet, but Jorge got the feeling he was chastised enough.

"Whoa."

The sudden interjection, quiet though it was, startled the three conscious warriors as AJ slowly trotted up. His eyes were locked on Krystal, but unlike Jenkins, he kept his composure.

"So I guess she is the second in your 'we' from earlier, sir?" He asked Jorge. The large Spartan nodded in confirmation, and AJ shrugged. After boarding a Covenant corvette, surviving a bomb, landing on an uncharted planet, being captured by (barely) civilized dinosaurs, and having to repair aforementioned corvette, AJ doubted anything could really surprise him anymore. Granted, an anthropomorphic talking fox that was also blue almost did the trick, but the brainiac was unimpressed. Elites weren't as easy on the eyes, but they were far more disturbing.

Where did that thought come from? AJ wondered incredulously. Granted, Jenkins was probably far worse off, but any attractive qualities of this female... whatever she was should have been ignored. Yet the shape of her body still set off a few signals in his brain, but AJ wrestled them into submission easily. _Most women in the Inner Colonies would KILL to be that fit,_ he couldn't help thinking.

Krystal winced uncomfortably at the thoughts she was reading within the minds of the soldiers. From Jorge she could only sense exasperation, overshadowed by his exhaustion. From Murphy, there were several conflicting emotions: the need to follow orders battling savagely against a fear and hatred of all things foreign and alien, and a cold, gnawing regret stemming from losing his first squad to something he had trusted. The things she felt from Jenkins' mind were best not described, but for some reason she had reminded him of his third girlfriend. His resulting memories had been altered to include Krystal instead of said girlfriend, and the result had left him in the catatonic state he was in now, clashing between the disgust that he was thinking such a thing and wondering what it would be like. AJ's thoughts were the clearest, though she could tell he was the youngest of the group. He had examined her and set about a base opinion upon which he would judge her from now on. How he would react was anyone's guess. _And they don't even realize I'm telepathic._ She thought. All in all, she was dealing with a very tired, frayed group of men that wanted one thing: to go home. And she had to admit, the thought had crossed her mind once as well. But to go home, you needed a home to go to.

"Alright, who has the staff?" Jorge asked in an annoyed voice, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. AJ and Murphy looked to Jenkins, who had just recovered from his brain meltdown. The scout reluctantly reached into his pocket and grasped the gold scepter. He drew it out and held it away from him. Krystal grabbed it with a courteous 'thank you', and he released it. Krystal instantly looked the staff into its holster, which was hanging on her left hip. Jorge noticed this, then pointed up to the controls from which AJ had presumably operated the door.

"Activate the doors, then everyone get to bed. If anyone wakes me up,

somebody better be dying." Jorge growled.

* * *

><p>I was a little hesitant when I described the Sabre pilots' reactions to Krystal, and I tried to keep a wide range as far as personalities went. Jenkins and AJ are okay with Krystal, Jorge may take a liking to her (nothing serious), and I may have Murphy come around. But that's for another day.<p>

4. Raining Wolves

I hope you guys will forgive the delay. I've been preparing for the next year of schooling, and my stories have gone a bit stale in my mind. Nevertheless, I bring you the fourth chapter of Jorge's Tale. I at least hope you guys enjoyed watching the scout blow a T-Rex's head off.

* * *

><p>"Journal entry 01529: It seems that the Covenant has finally discovered Reach. I... I suppose I have been naïve to assume that they would pass us by, to ignore humanity's greatest stronghold. Perhaps it's just because Reach is my home, but I had always fantasized that we would defeat them before... well, this. But what we thought then is irrelevant. We've got our orders. I can only hope that this time, unlike all the others before... we can beat them."

_ _ Jorge, in the first days of the Winter Contingency, audio file found among the wreckage of Carter's Pelican.

* * *

><p>AJ's gamble with the hangar bay doors ended up securing the ship, at least as far as the main entrances. That meant that the corvette was " for the moment " secure. Thus, Jorge ordered the marines to catch their forty winks, else he'd knock them unconscious. AJ and Jenkins had complied without question, and nearly instantaneously. They had semi-sprinted to the bridge, and when Jorge got there, they had already made themselves comfortable and passed out. Behind him, however, Krystal and Murphy were exchanging glares the whole trek back. Well, Krystal was glaring at Murphy's helmet, but his hunched posture and slow, deliberate pace communicated his distaste as well. The two had carried on like so ever since Jorge had moved ahead of them. Their continued hostility worried the large Spartan. He was nearly certain that Krystal had animal instincts; her claws and teeth likely weren't for show. That wasn't to say that Murphy was completely defenseless, though. He was thirty-two years old, a veteran by all rights in the war with the Covenant. He had been transferred to the Sabre program only after fighting and piloting on thirteen different battlefields, his greatest achievement being the fact that he had killed a Brute with only a knife and the clothes on his back. His larger size also counted for something, though Jorge was sure that the female glaring holes into Murphy's head could easily take on the grizzled war veteran. In a fight, Jorge figured that Murphy would narrowly win, though that was only because Jorge's sole experience with Krystal's combat skills had been when she was caught off guard.<p>

Regardless of the victor, such a conflict would break the fragile discipline that existed between the warriors. While he trusted Krystal only so far, he also knew that with her (fragmented) ship, they had a slim chance of escaping from the planet they were stranded on. As such, he had to nip this in the bud. As soon as the door to bridge doors hissed shut, the giant Spartan whirled around quickly, his speed deceptive for his large size. The two stalemated warriors behind him stopped in surprise, focusing upon Jorge instead of trying to make each other's head explode with a glare.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that there is some animosity between you two." Jorge said with a frown, one that had both of them look down awkwardly. "I've lost enough sleep as it is. If I lose any more because I'm worried about one of you killing the other in the dead of night, I'll just paint the walls with the two of you and be done with it." Jorge's impatience began to bleed into his tone and vocabulary, and Murphy shifted uncomfortably. Krystal's gaze remained locked on the floor, like a child being scolded for something. Obviously, the two felt that the intervention was completely unnecessary. Still, Jorge could tell that ground rules would have to be set.

"I want the both of you to sleep on opposite ends of the bridge, and in the morning, we're going to have a look at that village we passed through earlier." Murphy leaned forward as if he were about to object, but a glare from Jorge shut him up. Jorge focused his gaze on Krystal, and she looked him in the eyes.

"I'd rather not know why you distrust Murphy so much, but I really don't need your problems endangering anyone in this room. So drop it." She nodded slightly and brushed past him, heading over to a dark corner where the Grunts used to rest. She arranged several containers into a makeshift pad, laid down upon it, and turned her back to them without another word. Murphy went to walk past Jorge as well, but a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"We're not done."

Murphy looked up at Jorge, and the Spartan could see the marine's fists clenching. Something was eating him for sure. Jorge pulled him through the door, which hissed open once more. When it closed behind them, Murphy decided to speak.

"You do realize that we are at war with aliens, don't you? I mean, sure, she doesn't look like a Covvie, but does that really prove anything? How can you know she won't slit our throats just to watch the blood run?" Murphy demanded in a gruff, yet quiet tone. He pointed a finger at the door, which remained stubbornly shut. "I watched Harvest burn to ashes, along with my sister and parents. My wife was gunned down in the evacuation of Portov IV. I've seen countless million slaughtered by alien scum. And it all began with a peace treaty." He hissed acidly. "It all began when we tried to be nice and play the team game... just like what you're doing now."

Now Jorge understood: Murphy had seen all of the war, from beginning to present. Hell, he had probably been among the first to engage the Covenant, served under Johnson and Byrne as Harvest's skeleton garrison. The man had every right to be a xenophobic cock wad, but still... it didn't do well to let past scars hinder them now.

"The ones who burned our planets didn't exactly exchange holiday greetings." Jorge admitted. "But I saved her ass, and she has a ship. We could use it to get off this rock." Murphy just seemed to get angrier.

"I saw her ship, remember? I had a good chance to look at it while you were beating those lizards' brains in. Fragmented. Absolutely fucking destroyed. The only way to get it into space is with one bitchin' catapult!"

Jorge snorted and resisted the urge to backhand the man in front of him. "Yes, it's in pieces," he allowed. "But if we can get AJ and Krystal down there, maybe we can find a way to jury rig the Sabres, or maybe even repair the corvette. We've got no idea how many usable parts are at that wreckage until we find out." Jorge enunciated the last two words and jabbed Murphy's breastplate with each syllable. The marine did nothing to retaliate, but Jorge could get a sense that his opinion was unchanged.

"Odds are, none of those parts are salvageable. And even if they were, there's a snowball's chance in Hell that AJ and your fuzzy friend can reverse engineer enough of it to get off this dino turd of a planet. And then, we've got the locals to worry about, not to mention the wildlife!" Murphy ranted and raved. "And why the fuck to you trust her so much?"

Jorge opened his mouth with a harsh retort ready, but it died in transition as Murphy's words sunk in. Why did he trust Krystal as far as he did? It wasn't that she was unlikable, but Jorge couldn't really fathom why he didn't mind turning his back on her. Sure, they'd gone through one hell of a nasty encounter together, but that didn't necessarily mean that they were friends for life, either.

The encounter with the Zealot class Elites in the relay station rose to the front of Jorge's mind. The ugly, repugnant, alien creatures that had nearly killed Six and Kat, as well as putting the civilian girl in danger. He had put his own immense body in between the girl and the Elites' deadly blades. For some reason, Krystal reminded him of that girl: not helpless, per se, but in a very dangerous situation because of things she couldn't control. Either that, or she really sucked at landing.

"Because," he answered finally, "she's not like them."

Murphy stared hard into Jorge's face, his helmet rendering him unreadable. Finally, he shook his head and brushed past Jorge. The bridged door opened quietly as the weathered veteran walked over to a dark corner of the bridge and slumped down, removing his pilot helmet as he did so. The darkness concealed most of his facial features, but a long, cauterized streak of scar tissue ran all the way across the man's bald scalp. For some reason, Jorge felt like the bad guy then. Murphy had been fighting the Covenant for his nearly his entire adult life. The man had seen defeat after defeat, lost battle after battle, yet he still sat in the corner, cleaning his gun and preparing to sleep on a cold, unforgiving surface, ready to start a new day of war and bloodshed all over again. In a way, Jorge pitied the man; he had lost so many comrades and so many friends, that he had become a shell of his former self — a man who saw the outside world as a dark and weary place. Such a miserable existence was unfortunate, but Murphy's

demons were his own; Jorge had no business interfering so long as it didn't endanger anyone. For the moment, peace had been obtained.

With Murphy dealt with, Jorge had only one concern left before he could retire: Krystal. She had seemed rather down after his slight scolding, and it was never healthy for anyone to go to bed angry. He found her in the same corner she had slumped into at the start of his and Murphy's conversation. Her ears were half perked, meaning that she had been listening. Even though she knew he was there, she still stared at the wall like a stubborn teenager.

"Hey." Jorge tried, kneeling down beside her. She still did not look up, but her ears twitched at his greeting. She had heard him, alright.

"Don't take what he said too hard; he's been dealt a bad hand." Jorge said imploringly, sending a glance back over at the opposite corner of the bridge. Murphy was silent and still, his black-armored back toward Jorge and Krystal.

Krystal didn't respond. She just kept looking at the wall. Jorge frowned at her silence, worried that Murphy's attitude had offended quite possibly the only other sentient being on their backwards little planet. Then again, she had no inclination to help them in the first place; the only thing good they had done for her â€" killing the Tyrannosaurus â€" had been for their own interests as well as hers. She had very little obligation to stay now that she had retrieved her staff. Given her rough meeting with Jorge and Murphy's asshole demeanor, Jorge wouldn't blame her if she decided to leave in the middle of the night.

"It's not what he said that hurt." She said reluctantly. Her words intrigued Jorge, but he remained silent. Not what he had said? _What else could it be?_

"His thoughts and memories... those are what stung. His very world torched and burned by vile, ugly creatures. And yet..." She paused, and Jorge's mind began to grapple with the information she had given him. Thoughts and memories! She had read Murphy's mind? That she could do that astounded him to no end â€" Jorge had always brushed off telepathy as a carnival trick. And if she had read Murphy's mind, did that mean that she had read his as well? Or had planted some thought process or something to make him neutral to her?

Even as these thoughts ran through his mind, he watched Krystal try to nuzzle deeper and deeper into the corner, away from him. It didn't take a genius to realize that she had seen his suspicions running in his head. Jorge grasped her arm firmly, and the vixen stiffened.

"It's not that I can't trust you..." Jorge struggled to paint the picture in his head, to present his opinion in a way she would understand. "I just find it hard to believe that your telepathic. Have you been reading our minds this whole time?" He tried to not to make the question sound like an accusation, but it still came out like an interrogation; the military lifestyle he had grown up with hadn't taught him much in the way of gentle prodding and questions.

"Not exactly." Sensing that she wasn't going to get much sleep, the Cerinian brushed his hand away and sat up, still looking downward. "I can get a general feeling for one's focus and mood; it's similar to looking into muddy water. The more someone is thinking, the harder it is for me to see. However..." Her gaze flicked toward Murphy in a split second and then returned to the floor, so quickly that Jorge doubted he had even seen it.

"When you spoke to me, every time you said something in your language, a dictionary opened up for me to exploit. It was rather easy for me to learn your language in the small span of time that we had talked." Jorge nodded slowly. It made sense, in a weird way, that she wouldn't be able to flip through his mind like a book.

"And what about him?" Jorge asked, inclining his head toward the motionless marine on the other side of the bridge. Krystal shuddered, as if reliving some horrible nightmare.

"Every time he spoke, I could feel the rage within him. I could see what he saw on those days, feel what he felt. It was... horrifying. So many people..." Krystal trailed off, but Jorge still searched her face for some hidden answer.

"And?"

Krystal looked him straight in the eyes this time, the sadness gleaming in such bright blue orbs nearly tangible. "He hadn't told the whole truth. Yes, his wife was shot by the enemy during the evacuation of Portov IV. But he had to put her out of her misery himself. He feels that if he was forced to do such a devastating act, and watch all of his brothers die, that no one has any right to judge him. These unspeakable evils done by beings completely alien to me have made me a monster in his eyes, and there is very little I can do to change his behavior." She finished, and glanced back down at the floor once more.

Jorge didn't really know what to say; it was a paradox, to be sure. The Covenant "being the hateful, asinine bastards that they were" had pounded a glaring sense of hatred toward all things inhuman into Murphy's psyche. So convoluted was his outlook, that a perfectly friendly nonhuman had come to crash on the same planet he had, and he hated her purely for what she was. While unjust and distasteful, there was very little Jorge could do about it.

"I suppose it's rather difficult to accept, but Murphy is who he is because of scumbags like the Covenant. You alone can't change how he looks at aliens. Just try to deal with it, and we'll see if it can be resolved later." Jorge wanted to say something more comforting, both for Krystal's sake and Murphy's as well. However, the limitations of the English language "as well as his own wisdom" kept his intent at simply hoping that the matter would be resolved.

"Get some sleep, Krystal. You look like hell." Jorge said with a small smile. Krystal snorted quietly in amusement, then waved him off. Jorge stood up and walked away, content with what he had accomplished. After all, he was three hours off duty; morale be damned, he was getting some sleep.

The gargantuan Spartan found his usual resting place with his back to the viewport, facing the doorway. It was the sole entrance and exit

for the bridge. As long as he sat there, nothing would enter or leave without his knowledge. He prepared for a short, restful doze, and then was out like a light.

In the far corner of the bridge, five feet from where Krystal had laid down, was a small device. A PDA, to be more accurate. It's screen was completely black, running on reserve power, except for a small red dot at the top left hand side of the screen. The letters REC blinked in time with the red light, until the whole screen went dark. Inside of the PDA's hard drive, DOT permanently saved Krystal and Jorge's conversation both onto the hard drive and into her core memory as well. As the PDA fell into hibernate mode, the A.I. couldn't help but attempt to justify its actions.

I am an ONI program, after all.

* * *

><p>The next morning, It was not AJ or Murphy that woke the sleeping giant, but Jenkins. The nimble little man had half tapped, half smacked Jorge into full wakefulness, earning him a rough backhand swat that nearly sent him to the floor. Jorge groaned groggily and shook his head, blinking rapidly to clear his vision. The first thing to meet his gaze was Jenkins, who was rubbing his jaw and groaning in pain. The others were gone, presumably on some morning errand. For some reason, he got a sinking feeling that someone had pulled rank on Jenkins to get the scout to wake him up.<p>

"Son of a bitchin' Covvie! Damn it!" Jenkins swore as he held his injured jaw. Jorge ignored his whining and grabbed his helmet, putting it on with a quiet hiss as his suit pressurized. As Jorge's HUD configured with his suit, he stood up and rolled his shoulders, stretching out the kinks brought on by an unnatural sleeping position. A few internal pops here and there, and everything felt right again. He smacked Jenkins on the back, making the marine's hands dart from his jaw to his back and another "Damn it!" escape. The scout pitched forward and fell to the ground, whimpering in pain. Jorge ignored him and walked out of the bridge.

There was no one in the hallway, giving Jorge a lonely trek to the hangar bay. When he reached the immense place, the port side door was deactivated. Bright light streamed in from outside, bathing the Covenant hangar bay in golden light. The light rebounded from the faceted edges that the Covenant integrated into every nonessential surface on deck, casting prisms of golden rays around the interior and adding a sense of nirvana to the empty, silent hangar. Jorge paused to take in the breathtaking sight, then looked around for the others. They were nowhere to be seen, though the open hangar door might have been a clue. He turned toward the ramp just as Jenkins came out behind him, rubbing a snore nose and being rather grouchy. Jorge looked at him without sympathy and continued down the ramp, though he heard Jenkins' footsteps behind him.

When they reach the port door, Jorge noticed that most of the supplies that had been scattered by the crash had been cleaned up. The Pelican still lay on its back, and several of the heavier crates remained, but the first aid kits, ammo crates, weapons and MREs were all placed neatly in several orderly boxes near the Pelican. It seemed that either Murphy or AJ had burned a stick and marked each box, as its contents were mark on its side. Jenkins and Jorge jumped

down out of the ship simultaneously, landing softly in the cushioned moss. The sun shined down brightly upon them, in a way Jorge would have normally assumed that it was mid morning. However, since they were in an unknown portion of the galaxy, and he had no idea of the revolutions of the planet, an accurate guess was beyond him. Jenkins didn't seem to care, focusing instead on the two sparring figures ahead. Close to the impressive hulk of the Covenant corvette, in a small clearing created by the crash, two men in armor fought unarmed. AJ and Murphy exchanged fists, diverted strikes, and blocked heavy blows in an impressive bout of skill. AJ's moves were slower and stiffer, though it seemed that it was less competition and more of a lesson. That image was solidified when Murphy's stern, quiet instructions reached their ears.

The two dueling marines weren't the only ones in the clearing; sitting quietly in the shade of a grove of trees, Krystal watched from the perimeter. Her blue eyes darted around constantly, following their movements with reflexes akin to her feral counterparts on the human-occupied worlds. As a melee combatant, she was always fascinated with foreign styles. While the concept of diverting blows was an old trick in her book, most Cerinians settled for diversion and incapacitation. If she could judge by the thoughts and action of the men in front of her, Krystal could plainly see that their style had a far more final result. The blocks were few and appeared to be a last resort, which was wise considering that most of the UNSC ground troops encountered forces twice their size. However, diverting the strike was just part one. Once the enemy had been thrown off guard, the next step was the quickly and brutally incapacitate or kill him, whichever was easier. From the way Murphy pantomimed removing something from his chest or ankle before every kill implied a heavy use of knives for close range combat. Their kicks were not always high, and often were aimed at a joint or pressure point, targets that would yield greater impact in any one-sided fight.

While Murphy was the more experienced veteran, AJ did turn out quite a few surprises, one of which when he caught a kick and followed up with a leg sweep, before taking his 'knife' to his helpless opponent's Achilles tendon, a fatal wound on the battlefield. He finished the maneuver by twisting Murphy's leg, forcing the older vet to rotate, then stabbing his imaginary knife into the base of Murphy's neck. The two held the position for a split second, then AJ released his tutor. Murphy stood up slowly, then looked at AJ with his head tilted to one side in a thinking position. AJ looked abashed, his gaze low and away.

Jorge chuckled slightly when a stick impacted against AJ's chest, surprising him enough so that he let it fall. AJ picked up the stick awkwardly, glancing between the unfamiliar weapon and Murphy, who had also acquired a wooden club.

"Now," Murphy said with an invisible grin, " we begin round two."

* * *

><p>High above the sparring teammates, an unmarked spaceship hung in low orbit. It's design was unlike any ship in UNSC history. The angle of several spikes along its back, as well as its seemingly aesthetic propulsion system, gave it the appearance of an angled claw, or a predatory hawk. A black finish ran along the main viewport of the cockpit, while the rest of the body was painted a dark red. It was

roughly the size of a Pelican dropship, though the cannons on its bow suggested a much more deadly purpose than moving troops and supplies.<p>

Despite its size, only three people crewed the ship. The captain was seated in the cockpit, while the other were inside the cargo area. Even though they were in separate portions of the ship, the three conversed over the ship's COM system.

"Hey, Wolf. Are you sure you saw that ship go down on this planet? It doesn't look very inhabited..." A slick, reptilian voice asked from the cargo area.

"Indeed. It does seem quite... primal down there. I'd hate to know what got the pilot first: the crash, or the wildlife." A rich, sultry purr came from the other crewman in the cargo bay. His voice sounded like a wanna-be Casanova, something that had gotten him endless ribbing in the Academy. To reinforce his statement, the outdated survey equipment on the ship displayed a lush, jungle world, with no signs of civilization or technology. A downed pilot on such a primitive planet was doomed.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure its nice and gruesome. Hey Panther, be a sport and see if our hydro spanners are still working. I don't wanna get down there just to find out that we can't salvage the damn thing. The way this piece of junk's going, we won't get it back out of atmosphere." A gruff voice answered from the cockpit. "We've gotta get as much as we can off that wreck, or we'll never get back to the den.

Silence reigned for a few seconds, then Panther came across the channel again.

"I don't suppose any of the local women are too comely. And it was getting so lonely up here, too..."

"Panther, shut up and go back to your porno mags."

A shudder rocked the ship, cutting off Panther's snide remark, lame though it probably would have been. The two crewmen in the cargo hold stumbled about and fell, and a great clatter of parts and thuds echoed from there. A few groans were heard, then Leon came over the COM once more.

"Wolf, what the hell was that? Did we hit an asteroid or something?" His voice kept its same creepy pitch, although there was a small amount of worry coloring his words.

A heavy sigh came from the cockpit. "Gentlemen, this is what happens when you barter and steal to get a piece of junk with no jump drive: it falls apart. Today's special performance: orbit decay." Wolf finished in a deadpan tone. The hull began to shudder with more intensity, and the exterior began to gather traces of orange as the atmosphere heated the surface of the ship.

"Aw crud." The three said in unison. And then, the transport plummeted to the surface, burning its way into another heap of trouble for its unfortunate owners.

* * *

><p>Krystal looked out at the deserted village in confusion. The very same villagers that had been fast asleep when she had tailed the humans back to their base had disappeared from the village, leaving behind only the things they couldn't carry. Since some of the Sharpclaw were roughly the size of a full grown rhinoceros, there was very little that fit that quota. Thankfully, the buildings were still standing when the humans and their vulpine companion walked into the abandoned town cautiously, weapons at the ready in case of an ambush. Krystal sensed no beings nearby, but the humans weren't ones to rely on telepathy.<p>

"Maybe they all went out on patrol or something." Jenkins offered, peeking around a corner with his DMR. Across the way, Murphy snorted derisively at the scout's guess.

"Yeah, because I always bring my refrigerator when I go for a stroll." The veteran said sarcastically. Jenkins didn't reply, not that there was an opening for one anyway. AJ and Krystal darted inside several of the wooden huts, but each and every one was the same: barren and empty. Every buildings, awning, and dugout was completely empty. In some, it seemed that even several layers of dirt had been taken. Jorge examined the ground at his feet and found long, even drag marks, like those made by a sled or some form of pulled tray. Obviously, there had been a planned yet quick escape. Jorge frowned as he studied the tracks in the dirt. It wasn't the sudden vacancy that worried him; the locals had given them enough trouble. What got Jorge thinking was why. Something had to have triggered their sudden move. No one just got up in the middle of the night and moved without a reason. That the whole village had left meant something serious was going down.

"Ya know," Murphy said with a shrug as he walked up beside Jorge, his meager stature obvious next to Jorge's hulking form, "normally, you see a bunch of birds flying away at once. But I guess this works, too." He let his assault rifle fall in relaxed arms. "I mean, dinosaurs are technically primitive birds, anyway..."

"Yeah. What I'm wondering is what made them fly." Jorge said in an undertone. Murphy grunted in response, then waved at Jenkins. The scout waved back, but didn't say anything. Nothing new, then. He chanced a glance at Krystal, but she was just gazing into the woods, toward where her ship had crashed. Nothing from her, either. Still, something just felt wrong. Why would these natives just up and leave a village they'd clearly put some time into building? No matter the reason, it couldn't be good.

Jorge sighed and stood back up, catching Jenkins' attention. The scout jogged back toward him, and Murphy tapped AJ's shoulder. Krystal ambled back their way as well, but she wore what Jorge assumed was a troubled expression. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she kept silent as Jorge surveyed the area one last time.

"Well..." the gargantuan soldier muttered uneasily. If Kurt had been around, he would have already made a comment. The man had been a danger sensor with a near sixth sense. It was times like these that made Jorge miss his fellow Spartan-II's. "Something made them leave. I don't know if it was the Rex last night or something else, but they are gone. We should take advantage of it." He said resolutely. No one

followed up with anything. AJ stared at the ruts left in the moist mud/dirt mixture, following their trails into the jungle with his eyes. Murphy stood next to a hut, his rifle slung onto his back and his arms crossed. Jenkins seemed to be doing something constructive; the scout was going through the assorted pots and containers that were built into one of the huts, which the dinosaur tribe obviously hadn't been able to move.

He opened them one by one, finding only empty containers at first, but he stopped when he reached the last one. This container had a special symbol on it. Emblazoned across the lid was a crescent moon with a halo of stars around it. Obviously, the symbol had some arcane or profound meaning, but Jenkins seemed more preoccupied with what he found inside.

"Uh, guys... we may have a problem." He said, an edge creeping into his voice. Their attention directed to him, Jenkins brought a small object over toward them, his hands obscuring its exact properties. The others clustered around him, Jorge in the center, and he showed them his find. AJ, Jorge, and Murphy all shared a gasp. Krystal, however was puzzled.

"What? What's wrong?" Krystal asked nervously. She didn't like the feeling she was getting from the others; a sense of foreboding as they stared at the weapon in Jenkins' hand. It was a handgun, similar to what Jorge and the others kept fastened to their hips, in case of an emergency she was told. However, this one was quite blockier than theirs, black, and it seemed to have acquire a bit of age. The polycarbon had worn away somewhat, revealing the metal underneath the grip. The sights were rusted and smooth, and the trigger guard was broken off. The weapon was clearly unusable, but it didn't signify anything spectacular. _Wait a minute..._

"How old do you think it is, Murphy?" AJ asked hesitantly. Murphy lifted the piece from Jenkins' hand with his thumb and index finger away from his body, examining it like a spider he didn't want too close to his body. Finally, he grabbed it by the muzzle and gripped it firmly and properly. Under his helmet, his eyes ran over the weathered markings. It looked like a pistol he had seen a civilian use during a raid on Pellona, a mining outpost near Harvest where Insurrectionists had been conducting frequent raids. It was a civilian weapon for sure: low caliber and bulky design meant it was both commercial and old. If he guessed right, it was easily nine or ten years old, though there was no telling how much time had passed since the locals had found it. One thing was for sure, though: it wasn't theirs.

"It's not ours. It's human, but I'd say this thing was made before the Covvies showed up on Stella Point." Murphy said gravely. Jorge nodded, and the other two marines looked at each other in confusion. Krystal finally felt the idea click in her head as realization dawned upon AJ's face.

"If it's our tech, but way older than what we use, then how'd the lizards get it? How'd it get here?" He asked aloud. The gathered survivors glanced around at each other, but no one had an answer.

Added a little bit of mystery into the plot, though for how long it will last I cannot say. The logical side of me says the mystery of the old handgun will be solved by the end of this chapter. But I don't listen to him often. He gets me in trouble.

* * *

><p>Murphy ran his gloved fingers over the weathered pistol for what had to be the hundredth time. It was similar to a pistol he had seen long ago, on another far off, distant planet. It had been before Harvest. Before the Covenant had thought to dirty their hands with human blood. Aegis IV, a colonized asteroid, had been highly contested between the UNSC and native colonists. Since it was so far away from Earth, the UNSC hadn't been particularly expedient in delivering machines and supplies, something the colonists took notice of. The Insurrection had eventually reared its ugly head there, and what was once isolated riots and unorganized crime sprees became terrorist activities and drug rings. Everything that the UNSC sought to stamp out flourished inside of two months. And then, the flashpoint: an armed group of men had been crazy enough to attack the marine garrison near one of the docks. Murphy had ended the lives of several Insurrectionists then with the same kind of pistol that he held now.<p>

Murphy held the pistol up in the bright light of mid day and released the magazine. It slid out hesitantly, which meant that there was some kind of build up in the action. The pistol was undoubtedly useless, but he'd seen it in action. It was quite a piece, accurate and low recoil, but it lacked the firepower of the modern magnum, and had little chance of stopping a Brute or Elite in its tracks. Properly maintained, it might have slowed a Jackal, but he doubted its tactical worth. _Seven rounds, and all of them hit like Alice's purse. _A friend of his had described the MKII Requiem as a human-only weapon. It was designed to kill men, not monsters. _Of course, back then, the Innies were the monsters._ Murphy thought ruefully.

And it was true. The nightmares that haunted colonists and the militia was a masked man with a bomb and a gun, not a split-chinned, nine foot tall monster with burning plasma and energy swords. And as the war raged on, the term monster became popular and _very_ applicable. ONI seemed to have caught the worst of it. The spooks were running around at the beck and call of the UNSC higher ups, doing every low, dirty, honor-less chore that the Admiralty thought would win the war. Naturally, this meant ditching civilians and doing things generally frowned upon by nice, normal people. Murphy had been charged to do ONI work. He'd had to execute a rogue governor on one of the backwater worlds in order to 'negotiate' resources for the UNSC. The spooks hadn't informed him of what he needed to do until the gun was in his hands and the governor was on his knees. After that day, Murphy would never call anyone a monster again.

The pistol spun smoothly around his finger, the caked rust flying off of the trigger guard as he rotated the piece quickly, his thoughts elsewhere. Behind him, nearly silent on the beaten dirt of the hut he had taken shelter in, was Krystal. The Cerinian couldn't help but be fascinated by the complex creature that was Robert Adam Murphy. He always wore his helmet, hiding his features from the squadmates he put his life in so willingly. He was always cynical and cold, but

seemed to know what was good for everyone's health. His past was so full of death and sadness, yet he still kept fighting on and on. Krystal had met war veterans on her home planet before, but none of them could match the pain and agony that Murphy had endured. He was a sacrifice that humanity never even knew it had made.

"You know," he said suddenly, shocking Krystal out of her thoughts. "It's not polite to walk in unannounced." His voice was neutral, carrying no hint of malice or anger. Krystal hesitantly scanned the man's thoughts, but found only a cold, smooth surface within his mind. She couldn't read him at all.

"It's also impolite to sequester yourself from the rest of the group." She returned with a small amount of humor. Her attempt at a joke did little to dissuade him from his current state. She walked up beside him and sat down, staring at the rusted piece of metal in his hands. From her perspective, it didn't look like much of a weapon.

"This gun represents a problem." Murphy stated simply. Krystal looked at him, perplexed. She couldn't see how some rusted piece of scrap metal could pose a problem.

"This gun," Murphy continued, "was used by Insurrectionists before our war. We were sent in to 'pacify' and 'neutralize' them often." He turned the handgun around and revealed the open magazine slot. Krystal watched him jam the magazine into it with a muted click, and then he aimed down its corroded sights at some imaginary enemy.

"Several years ago, during the time the Covenant were wreaking havoc through our outer colonies, and ship closer to Reach had an accident very similar to the reaction that put us here. Aboard that ship was a known Insurrectionist cell known as the Freeman Society. A group of disgruntled colonists from a burned colony that saw the Covenant as a way to finally crush the UNSC. Their twisted fanaticism told them that the UNSC was their priority target. Fools, the lot of them." Krystal frowned as she processed his story. She knew what he was getting at, but she let him finish anyway.

"And?" She prodded. Murphy turned to look at her, and all she saw was her own reflection in the visor of his helmet. She couldn't read his expression or his mind. She was truly blind to everything about him, except his body language and speech.

"No one in the UNSC ever used this pistol. Ever. Yet, not only is it here, it's got some age to it. The dinosaurs didn't make it because I can still see most of the serial number on this thing. So the question remains: if it's here, then what else is?" He threw the weapon down on the ground and stood up slowly. Krystal joined him, and a worried look crossed her face.

"If these Freeman people find us, what will they do?" She asked hesitantly. Murphy looked at her, silent, and made no move to answer her. He simply picked up his Assault Rifle, inserted a new mag, and racked the bolt. The mechanical noise it made as a new round was put into the chamber gave Krystal all the information she needed.

* * *

><p>Kaspar rarely had reason to be frightened. He was a large Sharpclaw chief, deadly cunning and ferocious in battle. However, the spirits had ordained that he not be invincible. In their infinite wisdom, the Krazoa had created several species on Sauria that could easily destroy his people. And so, through disastrous hands-on experience, Kaspar had learned humility and tact. It was a valuable lesson that had saved himself and his tribe this time, though several under him still protested their move.<p>

Standing to his full nine foot height, Kaspar looked over their new encampment. Tents comprised of Groundwalker hides were erected in a small clearing underneath a rocky alcove, providing them a temporary shelter as the scouts searched for a more permanent residence. In the old days, he would have been restless, as they were dangerously close to what was once Thorntail Hollow. However, the Thorntails had long since moved on, ever since the world had descended into chaos.

Kaspar spotted several males hauling a few eggs and stripped carcasses toward the camp. The hunter had made good on their predictions; the area was ripe with prey and resources. As he watched, several females joined the hunters, and the tribe began to prepare the mid-day meal. Eggs, meat, a few fruits here and there; it was a feast to any Sharpclaw. Kaspar's thoughts, however, were not on the food. For the fortieth time, he cast his gaze toward the village they had just hastily vacated. He could still see some of the torches used to lead wayward hatchlings back to it. However, no Sharpclaw under his guiding protection would return to that place for some time, at least not until the end of the rainy season.

The humans had not presented much of a threat. Without their blasters, they were weak and fragile. However, there was a much more local threat to his tribe that encouraged him to move everyone so quickly. A threat the humans had no doubt already encountered. The Redeye packs that traveled behind the herds of prey had gotten uncomfortably close to the village. Normally, they would pass by without issue, as the last intelligent Redeye had passed away long ago. But the appearance of these humans had acquired the interest of the Redeye packs, if the lack of prey was any indication. The morning after the crashed starship, all wildlife had vacated the area. And so had his tribe.

One way or another, Kaspar thought grimly, _the humans will soon discover the dangers of the Redeye. Even if it takes them weeks, they will learn..._

* * *

><p>"Level us out! We'll roll at this angle!"<p>

"This piece of scrap will roll at any angle!"

"AT LEAST AVOID THE GODDAMN VOLCANO!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

CRASH!

* * *

><p>Jorge heard the thundering 'BOOM' seconds before he felt the tremor. The large Spartan looked around in curiosity, but he couldn't see anything new. The light of day was fading, and he and Jenkins had finished searching Krystal's wreckage as she, AJ, and Murphy secured the abandoned village. He looked down at the miserably light bag of things gathered from the scattered remains of Krystal's ship. A picture of three Cerinians, one of whom was obviously Krystal, was the first thing he found. He had also found several brilliantly glowing gems, a rare find he was sure of. The only other salvageable item he had found was, regretfully, something Jenkins had identified as a warp drive. It brimmed with unknown technologies, and seemed to be segmented for easier maintenance. It was a marvelous design, as since the Shaw-Fujikawa warp drive that the UNSC had used for years was a one use wonder: if it broke, it was destroyed. End of story. Regretfully, they had no functioning ship to place it in, AJ Reuters be damned. They also had no way of moving the drive except in pieces, something Jorge didn't want to attempt until it was analyzed further.<p>

Jorge motioned at Jenkins, who was looking into the long trail that Krystal's crash landing had left. The scout nodded, and walked back toward the large Spartan, his DMR tucked to his shoulder. Even though the Sharpclaw had disappeared, there was no good reason to let their guards down. As Jorge turned to trudge back towards camp, he spotted a column of smoke rising in the distance. On the mountain's side, thick black smoke curled up into the sky, clouding the otherwise clear day and blocking some of the sunlight. He mentally filed the location into his head for later exploration â€" he'd discuss it with Murphy and Krystal.

With his bag of memorabilia slung over his shoulder, Jorge stormed off toward the village, Jenkins beside him. With all the supplies salvaged and moved into the corvette, they could comfortably stay in the Covenant ship nigh indefinitely. However, with the sudden disappearance of the Sharpclaw tribe, the village became so much more appealing. AJ and Krystal had already moved some supplies into the village, and Murphy had completed recon. It was unanimous: the village was much better than the corvette.

"So, uh, Jorge; tell me somethin'." Jenkins said loudly, breaking the unnecessary silence. "I don't wanna sound rude or nothin', but why are you trying so hard to keep us alive?" He glanced over to look at Jorge's expression, something much more possible now that Jorge had decided to leave his helmet on the corvette.

The Spartan's brow furrowed as his expression darkened; ghosts from the grisly past awakened within him. Jenkins noticed his hunched shoulders and the darkened mood. It didn't intimidate him, but just made him even more curious.

"What I am about to tell you is never told to Krystal." Jorge said stonily. Jenkins quirked a brow at that, but could comment right away as the two jumped down from a fifteen foot high opening in the rock wall.

"Despite her combat skills, despite everything we've seen about her, she's just a peacekeeper. She was the equivalent of a police officer on her planet. She can never know the cruelties of war. Understood?"

"Yeah, I got it." Jenkins said nervously. He wasn't too unnerved, he just wanted to hear the damn story!

"Four years before Harvest, there was a cataclysmic natural disaster that occurred on one of our outer colonies. I'm not going to name it because it no longer exists." Jorge said simply. "Their technology was wiped out and 80% of the population died in one night. Afterward, we lost all contact, and I was dispatched along with a platoon of Marines to see to the damage." Jorge paused in his story to leap over a crevice, an action Jenkins mimicked.

"It was terrible: burned out husks of giant buildings, government collapsed, no one to be found... except for the bodies. Nothing but piles of ash here and there. We found survivors, though. Angry, violent rejects of a dead planet, the one's who had only stayed alive because they had spit in Death's face." Another hill appeared, which they slid down. "It was like the old west back during the 19th century. There was no law, no governing body of any kind. There was only the law of nature: the strongest survive. We encountered the remains of a town, and gave them food and weapons. I was entrusted a family to protect, the Robinsons." Jorge faltered, and they continued in silence for a while.

Jorge picked the story up just as the village came into view. "That night, bandits attacked. My platoon commander was killed outright, a knife in his throat. The Marines were caught by surprise, and were easily slaughtered. I was in the Robinson house when I heard the shots. The father and eldest son ran outside, only to be shot down by a passing Warthog. Before I could get out the door, a satchel charge was placed on the wall. I tried to cover the rest of the family, but... the entire house was incinerated. Dr. Halsey's new armor saved me, but I watched their little eight month old daughter burn to cinders in her mother's arms. I had failed." He kicked a tree as he passed it, sending it to the ground from the force of the blow. Jenkins warily side stepped it, and caught up to Jorge just as Murphy winched the door closed.

"I killed every last bandit, but I still couldn't save the people I had pledged to protect. And so, I plan on making sure all four of you survive this God-forsaken planet. Understand?" Jorge turned to Jenkins. Not one for profound meanings and touching moments, the Scout simply shrugged.

"Sure. Just glad to know you won't leave me in a ditch." He said jokingly. Jorge just gave him a dead stare. Jenkins grinned sheepishly, and was saved from an annoyed Jorge by the appearance of Krystal. The Cerinian had noticed the bag slung over Jorge's shoulder and had come over out of curiosity.

"Hey Krystal." Jorge said with a grin. She returned it with a smile of her own, but her eyes immediately went to the bag.

"What do you have there?" She asked. Jorge took the bag from his shoulder and set it down in front of him, opening it for her to look.

"A few things from your ship that I thought you'd like." All of a sudden, it was the metal giant's turn to be sheepish. He rubbed the back of his head and turned, not meeting Krystal's eyes. She smirked

at his reaction, and looked inside the bag. She gasped when she saw the picture. Her hand slowly reached inside and took hold of the photograph. A film of tears came to her eyes as she looked down at the picture of her two brothers, Karn and Mendel, as they both wrestled for the center. It was the only memento she had of her family. She held the picture close to her chest, then looked over at Jorge.

"Thank you Jorge. This means so much to me." She said earnestly. She watched with some amusement as his ears reddened slightly.

"It was nothing. I just figured you needed something from the ship, and that was what I found." He said quickly, eyes roaming everywhere in an attempt to avoid her gaze. She giggled at his antics, and looked into the bag again. When she did, Jorge caught sight of a peculiar look on Jenkins' face. He had a broad, closed grin, and his eyes were narrowed. He looked like he had already heard the punchline to a joke. Jorge frowned at the scout, who simply turned around and went whistling over to a nearby hut, where AJ was most likely tinkering with something.

What's gotten into him? Jorge wondered as he watched Jenkins leave. Krystal stood back up, several of the gems he had found clutched in her hands.

"Thank you so much, Jorge! I can use these to replenish my staff. I thought I had lost them." She said brightly, and once again Jorge got that awkward fuzzy feeling all over again. He managed to suppress it this time, though, and noticed Murphy sprinting towards them. Thinking something was wrong, he nodded towards the veteran marine, and Krystal turned to look as well.

"Jorge! I'm glad you're here!" Murphy said loudly, his chest heaving as if he had run a great distance. Which he probably had.

"What's wrong?" Jorge asked gruffly. Krystal gathered her gems and photograph into the bag and set it to the side, then turned in time to hear Murphy's report.

"Another ship just crashed! It's like this planet is a magnet or something." Murphy said, and then pointed towards the smoke in the distance. "They nearly hit a bed of lava, but they smacked the side of the volcano pretty hard. If anyone's still alive, we should check before it gets dark. The locals will have them then."

A third ship in as many days didn't bode well. Something about the planet was bringing down star ships left and right. But now was no time for contemplating such trivia.

"Right. I want Jenkins and Murphy to come with me." Jorge said gruffly. "AJ and Krystal can stay here and make sure nothing stupid happens while we're gone. If we find any survivors, we bring them back. Murphy, I'll need you to help me salvage anything we can find. Agreed?" The other two nodded. "Alright then, go tell the others."

Krystal and Murphy turned and sprinted toward the hut where Jenkins and AJ were, and Jorge gazed up at the smoking hillside in the distance. A cold feeling settled into the pit of his stomach, and he got the sinking feeling this planet wasn't so keen on letting them

go.

Murphy returned with Jenkins, and together the three of them lifted the gate and dashed off into the underbrush, towards the mountain. AJ closed the gate behind them, then came back to find Krystal sitting in a meditative position. He sat down next to her and examined the pose with curiosity.

"What are you doing?"

Krystal didn't answer right away, and closed her eyes while taking a deep breath.

"I'm going to try and see if I can contact the survivors, if there are any. They need to know that they're in great danger."

AJ nodded, not really comprehending what she was doing since he had not been clued in on the whole mind reading business, and simply sat back and let Krystal do her voodoo. _They're not the only ones in trouble around here, though..._

* * *

><p>"Sir, there's been another crash. It's further away than the other two, but they haven't gone towards it yet. I think they missed it." A voice echoed in darkness. Silence reigned for several deafening seconds.<p>

Finally, a smooth voice replied, "Send a team to check the crash site. It may contain something useful. If those dogs from the UNSC show up, though, disappear. I don't want them to be aware of us until it's too late." The order was given with an air of malice and superiority; this man liked holding total power.

"Of course, sir. And if we should find any survivors?" There was a hint of anticipation in the servant's voice, and it came across clearly to the boss. A cold chuckle filled the dark room.

"Survivors? There are no survivors."

* * *

><p>The first thing Wolf felt as he re-entered the waking world was pain. A hot, stinging pain in his left leg that instantly made him groan. The sharp smell of ozone filled his nostrils, and he snorted to clear the odor. He opened his eyes groggily, painfully aware of the throbbing headache he had. A spark to his left made him open his eyes wider, and he remembered where he was. Above him, a wire sparked and sputtered, its copper claws just inches from the tip of his snout. Had he sat up, he probably would have received the last shock of his life. Wolf warily grabbed the cable behind its ruptured maw and lifted it away from his sensitive nose. He sat up slowly, holding the still sparking cable away from his body, and looked around. The pitiful ship that his team had acquired through many threats and back room deals lay all around him in a shattered, sorry mess. Wires and cords dangled lifelessly from their homes in the walls and ceiling, torn open by the ruptured hull. He glanced around, then slowly stood up, wincing in pain as his leg flared up again. He looked down at said appendage and found a small piece of metal sticking out of his

thigh. He groaned in exasperation and released the cable, letting it spark beside him as he steeled himself. This is gonna hurt like a bitch.

Wolf let a slow breath out, then grasped the metal shrapnel firmly with one hand. With a savage jerk, he tore the jagged piece of metal from his leg, but wasn't able to muffle the howl of pain that escape him as agony filled the space the metal had left. He tossed the scrap metal aside angrily and examined the wound. It was a shallow stab wound that had pierced the muscle. It would probably take a few days to heal. Wolf was thankful that was his only injury, but he knew it would cause complications if he didn't find help soon. Speaking of which...

"Leon! Panther!" Wolf called out. His voice croaked a bit from lack of water, a testament to how long he'd lain there, but no one answered. He called again, but the only sound he could hear was wind wafting through the trees. _Wait... trees?_ They had crashed into the side of a volcano, a barren mountainside that he thought had held on to the ship. The presence of trees meant that the ship had traveled some way after the initial contact.

Wolf limped toward the only source of light, a huge rend in the side of the ship. He ducked under a low hanging cable and stepped out into the bright sunlight, squinting as he did so. Sure enough, a forest greeted his adjusting eyes. The Star Wolf leader glanced around at the wreckage, but could see no sign of his wingmates.

"This is just perfect." He muttered under his breath. Wolf was now officially unarmed, alone, and stranded on a supposedly uninhabited planet. He kicked at a piece of the hull, frustrated at the futility of the situation.

"Leon! Panther! Where are you guys?" Wolf called once more. Silence answered him. The lupine mercenary sighed in exasperation and sat down, keeping his injured leg out in front of him. He patted his pockets, searching for anything he'd be able to use later. His search was largely fruitless; all he found was his ID and a few batteries for his blaster, which was oh so conveniently missing. As Wolf sat there wondering exactly when he had killed Life's cat, a certain Cerinian began telepathically exploring the crash site. And then, she found our poor pilot leaning up against his torn ship.

Hello? Can you hear me? A feminine voice echoed in Wolf's head. Startled, he nearly yelped in surprise. Nearly. Instead, he looked around in confusion.

"What the hell?"

Think your responses and I'll hear them. My name is Krystal. I crashed here just like you. The woman sounded fairly friendly, but Wolf wasn't too keen on having someone running around in his mind.

Uh...ok. Have you seen a chameleon and a panther? I lost my wingmates in the crash. He tried. He got the faintest sense of impatience from the female in his head. Now that sounded weird...

_There's no time! This is a primitive world; the locals are largely

comprised of violent tribes of dinosaurs. Some of them aren't even in tribes. You have to hide until my friends find you!_ She said insistently. That got Wolf's attention, cutting off his sharp retort.

Dinosaurs? Like, big sets of teeth with bad attitudes? Those kinds?

_ Precisely. I recommend hiding in a tree or the wreckage of your ship. Are you injured?_ A small amount of embarrassment colored his next words... er, thoughts.

_I took some shrapnel to the leg, so no sprinting. But you'd be amazed at how well I can hide. Name's Wolf, by the way. Wolf O'Donnell. _

_ Krystal. My friends will be there soon, so stay hidden. Look for a large person in power armor. __His name is Jorge. He'll have two more of my friends with him._

_ Gotcha._

Wolf sat there for a second, expecting a response. When he didn't receive one, he shook his head. That was weird. Still, now that he knew all kinds of beasties haunted the trees around him, and assuming that they would come running to the crash site, he knew he had hide quickly. The wreckage wasn't an option; it was holed and easy to enter, with very few, if any hiding places. As his eyes roamed the clearing his ship had made, he noticed a fair bit of shading covering an area near the base of a tree. Getting up slowly to keep his leg behaving, he shambled over to it and found a three foot deep recession in the ground about as wide as a G-diffuser. He quickly slid down into it, gritting his teeth as cold agony seeped from his leg wound. He managed to stay silent, though, and he soon saw that to be a blessing.

Three silent minutes after he had found his little hidey hole, a rumbling began to sink into the ground. It shook Wolf's very bones, the vibration coming in through his back and arms. Then it stopped, only to start again for a short time. This repeated several times, and recognition dawned on Wolf, along with trepidation and a small bit of fear: _footsteps._ A REALLY big something was heading his way. Rolling very slowly, Wolf peeked past the tree to look back into the clearing. And he stared.

Not one, not two, but _four_ large dinosaurs stood in various spots of the clearing. They were all the same species, although one was slightly larger than the others. Still, he recognized the species: Allosaurus. The smaller ones were 9 meters tall, but the larger one had to have been at least a dozen. They had mottled brown skin, pebbly and coarse, and each had a wicked set of teeth and claws. The smaller dinos looked around the wreckage, the larger one had a more specific target: the spot where Wolf had been sitting not five minutes ago. It sniffed the ground intently, then raised its head and sniffed the air. Wolf's eye widened, and he glanced down at the still bleeding wound in his leg. The large Allosaurus took a tentative step towards his hiding spot, and it growled. The other three stopped milling about and looked towards their leader. It sniffed again, then took another step. And then another. _It was tracking him._

Wolf cursed silently at his misfortune, then looked around in desperation. It would reach his hiding spot in about thirty seconds, and he didn't have anything to defend himself with. The dinosaur could easily tear him to pieces alone, and this one had three others with it. He was in no shape to run or fight, anyway, which put him in a very simple position: right fucked.

The ground trembled as the large theropod approached, and Wolf shut his eye in anger. Anger at his own helplessness, at his wound, at his luck. Just when the tip of the predator's snout passed the tree, however, Wolf's luck changed.

Across the clearing, a loud clattering noise ricocheted within the trees. All four Allosaurs turned in curiosity, then stomped toward the noise with interest. Wolf couldn't believe it as they walked away, and nearly died of fright when something tapped his shoulder.

Jorge shook his head as he examined the wreckage. It was totally destroyed; the hull pretty much littered the clearing like some sort of scrap metal rain. The innards of the ship also lay about, cables and broken screens scattered about on the ground. But the largest issues were the four dinosaurs stalking towards a very certain tree, one that had a few specks of blood on it. Whoever had survived had taken refuge there. Krystal had called over the radio and informed them that the survivor's name and species was Wolf, something Murphy couldn't help but make a comment about originality. Names aside, the guy wasn't likely to last very long. All they needed was a distraction.

Jenkins yawned loudly and went to grab something out of his pack. Jorge gave him a dry stare, but he caught interest in the metal can Jenkins started digging into. When the scout withdrew a few grapes, the top of the can clinked with the bottom, making a loud metallic noise. A plan coming to mind, Jorge snatched the can and emptied it in front of him, much to Jenkins' open mouthed horror. Bending down, Jorge scooped up a few rocks and dumped them into the can, then closed it shut. He handed it to Murphy, who nodded knowingly. Jorge began creeping around the perimeter of the clearing, keeping several trees between himself and the dinos at all times. Just when they reached Wolf, Jorge waved at Murphy. The veteran nodded and turned, then chucked the can full of rocks at the nearby rock face. It made a terribly loud clattering noise, and it attracted the dinosaurs' attention. They stomped over towards it, allowing all three of the humans to move, silently, to Wolf's hiding spot.

Jorge reached the lupine first, and found him in decent shape. He looked scared, a bit relieved, and had a nasty gash in his leg. Jorge slowly reached forward and tapped him on the shoulder, and was all too thankful that Wolf wasn't the screaming type. The mercenary pilot turned around quickly, revealing his electronic eye patch to Jorge. He seemed genuinely confused at Jorge's appearance, mainly his face. The Spartan's eyebrows lifted in surprise, but then he held out his hand.

"We need to go, before they lose interest." He whispered insistently. Wolf nodded, then tried to stand up. He hissed in pain and fell back down softly, then indicated his leg. Jorge didn't really have time to think, but just moved forward. Before Wolf knew it, he was slung over the back of the tallest alien he'd ever met. The humiliation wouldn't

hit him until later.

I just hope Leon and Panther are alright.

* * *

><p>Another one down, lads and lovelies. And to think, now that Star Wolf is here, things may be a bit interesting...

6. Unwelcome Guests

After drowning in the video game paradise of Steam for about three months, I'm back to do another chapter for this surprisingly popular story.

* * *

><p>With Wolf in 'custody', which basically meant he was helped along by Jenkins because of his injuries, the group of frustrated marines left the crash site to its smoldering fate. Their trek back to the village, and from there to the ship, would consume most of the afternoon and render their more stealthy maneuvers impossible. It did, however, give them someone else to talk to. When the only other conversational options are the voices in your head, it proves to be a valuable commodity. Because of that, Jenkins and Wolf were quite chatty on the way back.<p>

"So, _everyone_ in this system is a fuzzy as you and Krystal?" Jenkins asked incredulously. Wolf nodded with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. Don't tell me there's just one race with you guys? We've got about thirty five different canine breeds alone. It's very diverse in the Lylat system." The mercenary said with a smirk, before hissing in pain when he put too much weight on his injured leg.

"We're pretty much a one-look race. Sure, a few of us are darker than the others, but for the most part we all look the same. I can't imagine the racism that would flourish if we were as diverse as you guys." Jenkins said, imagining it. "We didn't get the Racial Equality Act until 2170, and that pretty much decreed that hate crimes were dismissed and rendered most racism obsolete. So now, most of the slang and hard feelings died out."

Ahead of them, Jorge and Murphy were debating about whether or not they should trust Wolf with any UNSC-related intel. Sure, he was freely giving them information, but the guy was a merc; mercenaries as a rule remember everything they hear, because there's a chance someone will want to pay for information later. The stuff Jenkins was spouting off wasn't exactly secret, but in their unique situation, information would be the currency of any deal they made.

Ahead of them, a small river impeded their progress. It came up to Murphy's waist, so Wolf would probably need extra help fording it. (For explanation, try crossing a rushing river while hopping on one foot. Kudos to those who pull it off.) Jorge nodded to Murphy, and the senior marine went back to add another shoulder to Wolf's support as the injured lupine approached the river. He seemed slightly miffed to be babied like this, but he figured this small embarrassment was

better than the humiliation of falling and floundering about in shallow water. As the icy water washed over his wound, Wolf bit the inside of his cheek to keep from yelping in shock and pain. The cold water helped numb the injury, though, so he was mostly just bellyaching over how cold it was. To the humans, it was refreshing, since they had walked roughly four miles under their own power in a humid, hot afternoon in a jungle. Jorge calmly waited for them to cross, having walked across it with simple ease. He scanned the vegetation for threats, but the birds were singing and the rest of the animals were going about their businesses. They were alone.

"So, how'd you guys end up here, anyway?" Wolf asked, shaking his good leg to rid it of excess moisture. Jenkins opened his mouth to start babbling on again, but a look from Jorge cut him off.

"We'll explain more when we reach the crash site of our ship," Jorge said warily. "Until then, try to keep an ear up for danger. We're not out of the woods yet." Wolf took the neutral admonishment well, and the rest of the trip was carried out in relative silence. Just when the village came into view, Jorge slowed down to let the other three past him.

He cast his gaze backward, just in time to watch a bush shake a little too deliberately. Murphy hesitated when he noticed his observation, but kept moving. Jorge could handle himself. Jorge continued staring into the vegetation, but nothing else appeared. He frowned, then turned and slowly caught up with the others. As he got farther away, the men hiding within the bush sighed in relief. One was a gruff man, with a patchy beard and a torn leather jacket. He had a slash going across the bridge of his nose, with a full head of black hair. The other man was had a dark complexion, with short-cropped black hair. He wore a faded and torn Traxis administrative uniform, pretty much khaki pants with a fold-over dress jacket, the kind with only one lapel. They both wore dirty, worn work boots and had old pistols on their belts. Their pistols matched the model that Murphy had been worrying over all morning, though their conditions were greatly improved.

"And again, our luck holds out." The darker man said. His bearded compatriot nodded in agreement, and they both leaned back onto their heels within the cover of the underbrush. They sat in silence for several minutes, watching the marines fade into the jungle with their crippled cargo. After they disappeared, the darker man reached up to his ear to activate his earpiece.

"Sir, they are headed back to the village. I doubt they will come anywhere near the wreck for some time." He said quietly. The other man said nothing.

"I suppose you two have completed your assignment then, hmm? Return to base immediately; we have much to discuss." The message was punctuated by a small click and then static, signifying that the conversation was over. The administrator nodded, and together the two slid silently back into the bushes, but not before hearing the ominous rumble of an approaching thunderstorm.

* * *

><p>Krystal and AJ both peered over the barrier of the village wall out toward the forest, their eyes searching the tree line in the

direction that Jorge and the others had gone for their return. The two had busied themselves with bringing supplies from the Covenant corvette and checking around the village for hidden entrances or weaknesses in the barriers. As it stood, plenty of dehydrated food, water, and ammunition, as well as a somewhat sparse amount of medical supplies, had been relocated to one of the guardhouses near the center of the village. In Krystal's exploration of the deserted village, she had found several nuts and fruits that had yet to spoil, but their size and unique scents made AJ wary of toxins or allergies. Krystal had put him at ease after identifying both plants and gave him a primitive run down of their nutritional value.<p>

And so, the two sat with their proverbial thumbs up their asses, watching and waiting for Jorge, Jenkins, and Murphy to return with the downed pilot. As the night approached, so too did the colossal thunderheads of an enormous storm. In the distance, they could barely make out sheets of rain coming down in an effort to drown the forest and its inhabitants. It made no signs of stopping, and seemed to be headed toward the village. Sure enough, the downpour reached their cozy little village before the others had returned. Since the Sharpclaw had seen fit not to put up any awnings or other such structures in case of rain, the two had to settle for relocating to the gate itself. There, a guardhouse with a window carved into one wall served its purpose. As they sat there, they listened to the drumming of hard rain on unyielding wood. It was monotonous and calming, but for some reason Krystal couldn't sit still. She paced the small shack like a cornered animal.

"Hey, what gives?" The ever insightful AJ asked. She didn't look at him, but kept digging a trench into the dirt floor with her march.

"I'm worried. Something out there feels wrong. Very wrong." She said, her brow furrowed and tail swishing about here and there. AJ cocked a brow.

"Is this more of that telepathic mumbo jumbo? I'm afraid you have to explain that one to me." And maybe just talking about it would calm her down. AJ knew that talking out worries made them seem superficial or silly most of the time.

"When you were working on the generator inside your crashed ship, you told me about radiation. How there were dangerous levels, and then how there was background radiation; the stuff that is always there, but appears harmless. Well, with telepathy, creatures and people are dangerous levels while the entire planet is background radiation. I can focus on the creatures and the others quite easily, but the planet itself is impossible to understand." She said all this while pacing, though her stride lessened and she slowed down.

"It's like trying to stop a river with a bucket; whenever I try to examine the general feel of the planet, I only get vague sensations and images, nothing worth meaning. It's just music to the play, as Jorge would say." At this, AJ tilted his head and gave her an accusatory glare, and Krystal had the decency to blush and turn her head.

"I received all my knowledge about your language from his mind. It was only one of many phrases I found." She said quickly, embarrassed to reflect on how she had learned their language.

"Yeah yeah, you rummaged through Jorge's bean for a bit. Big deal," AJ said with a dismissive gesture. "Now get back to the planet being background telepathy or what not."

"Right. Well, until this storm hit, the planet had a very low creep to it; it felt like a slow, small stream. But now it is much more frantic and rapid, and for some reason it is dulling my senses for sentient beings. I can barely sense you and we're in the same room." She stopped pacing in favor of leaning up against the wall and gazing out into the forest, her back to AJ.

"You know how background radiation is low-level and harmless?" She finally said after a few seconds of silence. AJ just nodded, though she did not see it. It was rhetorical question anyway.

"Well, what happens when that radiation reaches high levels?" He didn't have an answer.

The two sat in quiet for some time, until a loud knock at the door brought them out of the contemplative silence that had wrapped itself around them like a cold blanket. The two rushed from the guardhouse and to the gate, the harsh rain pounding their heads as they ran. They reached the gate just as another round of knocking came again. AJ ran past Krystal to get to the opening mechanism while she stopped to open the slide. Sure enough, Jorge's hard brown eyes were staring right back at her. Behind him, she could see Jenkins helping who she assumed was Wolf to the gate, Murphy walking smugly behind them.

"Did you have a nice trip?" Krystal said with a smirk, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the rain. Jorge stared at her for a few seconds, but then his stone facade cracked into a rueful chuckle. Before he could retort, the gate began to raise, allowing the wet and tired rescue team into the village.

Murphy helped Jenkins hurry Wolf into the village, then went back up to the door mechanism to help AJ lower it slowly enough that it didn't break anything. As they did that, Jorge and Jenkins hauled Wolf to a longhouse that had been cleared earlier. It was a single floor structure that was roughly seventy-five feet long, mainly used for dining and meetings. A single huge table filled the middle, and it became Wolf's bed as Jenkins and Krystal looked over the wound on his leg. The wound wasn't all that serious; a shallow stab wound from where shrapnel had embedded itself in Wolf's thigh, cutting muscle fibers and pushing some aside. The actual damage could at a quick pace, but the tendons needed to be straightened out lest they knot up inside his leg.

Krystal let Jenkins take over here; even though she had more generally knowledge about medicine than he did, this was a war wound. As a marine and a pilot especially, he had been trained to treat wounds like these long before he had earned his wings. Jenkins wiped the rain from his forehead and dug into a pouch on his leg, pulling out a small bag full of bandages and small syrettes full of a clear liquid. He quickly drew out a roll of bandages and two syrettes of the mystery fluid before stowing his supplies once more. Wolf eyed the chemical skeptically, but shrugged when he saw Jenkins' hard expression. With a steady hand, Jenkins applied the morphine just above the wound, and almost immediately all sensation left Wolf, and

he was cradled in a numb, giddy state of weightlessness. His tongue even lolled out of his mouth, a humorous sight as well as a signal to Jenkins that he could start cleaning the wound.

The scout motioned behind him, and Krystal brought him a bowl of warm water they had heated early by fire in preparation. With a boiled rag, he carefully dug out small traces of dirt and metal that had entered Wolf's leg at the time of the crash, while the lupine mercenary just sat back and grinned goofily. With his needs met, Krystal and Jorge left the longhouse to give Jenkins room to work and Wolf some measure of dignity. They did, however, hear the rather stoned chuckle coming from Wolf before the door slid shut roughly.

The two companions stood on the porch, the roof above them keeping the rain and thunder at bay as the world around them became wet and dreary. AJ and Murphy soon joined them, their task with the gate complete. AJ chuckled when he saw Jorge's wet-dog appearance.

"What's the matter, sir? You look like you got caught out in the rain." He said with a smirk. Jorge just growled and turned to Krystal.

"What did you figure out about him? He's no one we've met before." Jorge said, his eyes glancing back toward the longhouse door every few seconds, as if expecting Wolf to come out wild and swinging. Or tearing, if the mercenary's claws was as real as they looked. The guy looked like a werewolf with a cyber update.

"Well, I could only catch a glimpse of his mind; I couldn't dig any deeper without him knowing and frankly, I wouldn't want to. His name is Wolf O'Donnell, and he's a mercenary well known in the Lylat system. It's an inhabited star system nearby." She glanced back toward the longhouse. "Even though he has taken a few jobs that weren't good for the people, he still has some ragged sense of honor. As long as we've made it clear we're not with the authorities, he'll probably help. He's very intelligent; we should at least utilize that."

Jorge did his usual thinking face: frowning. "He's a criminal?" When Krystal hesitantly nodded her head, his frown turned to a scowl. He turned away and watched the now monsoon-worthy rain come crashing down onto the sturdy wooden buildings. He knew that Wolf was a mercenary. He had the demeanor, the vocabulary, etc. But to hear that he was a criminal on top of that... sense of honor or not, Wolf posed a threat. And so did those wingmates he'd mentioned.

Jorge's gaze shifted from the village to the jungle, watching the immense forest take the beating from the storm. Smaller bushes and trees were wilting under the force of the rain, but it seemed that the larger ones were used to it. If they had survived that brutal crash landing, any hollow tree or alcove would protect them from the elements. However, he suspected that there were several predators that didn't mind the rain. He knew that snakes could be pretty hard in climates like this, so all he could do was hope that the two made it somewhere safe.

But back to the matter at hand. Krystal had seen the insides of this guy's skull, and had vouched for his character. And while he believed

her, albeit grudgingly, he was still unsure about what they were going to do about O'Donnell. At the very basic level, he represented another mouth to feed and another potential drain on their medical supplies. The former was plenty, but their ability to treat wounds was slim to none unless they found more medical packs around the crash site. The rain wouldn't harm the supplies inside; the containers were airtight. For Wolf's sake or not, He and the others would be scrounging for med packs after the torrential downpour subsided.

"Alright, he can stay. But only as long as you think he is trustworthy. However, the morphine drip he's on now is one of our last. When this storm passes, we're going back to the hangar bay to search for more supplies." As Jorge finished, a huge BANG filled the air, and lightning lit up the darkened sky. Night would soon fall, and then the whole world would be a series of thunder and flashes of light. Jorge turned around to continue speaking to Krystal, but his and the others' surprise she was leaning against the wall, panting heavily and eyes wide. Jorge and Murphy exchanged a look. Was she afraid of the dark?

AJ felt a cold tingle roll down his spine, and he walked over to Krystal. She was still panting and for all the world like a cornered animal, but she still met his gaze.

"This about the planet's telepathy, isn't it? He asked quietly. She could only nod and blink, her breath now coming in pained, ragged gasps. AJ grasped her shoulder, then let go. Jorge looked past him at Krystal for a moment.

"What's wrong with her? Is it more about telepathy?" No matter how many times he had to remind himself that she had proven it to him, he was still incredulous about the idea. AJ looked at Krystal, then back to his teammates.

"She told me that the planet itself had a telepathic presence. Not an actual mind, per se, but it is there. But it's so large and old that she could never really understand it. Like using a bucket to hold the ocean; there's just too much." he gestured to her cowering form, a sight that seemed to disturb Jorge greatly. "For some reason, the storm has increased the presence around here. And she can't help but feel crushed by it."

Jorge pushed past him and knelt in front of Krystal. She raised her head to look at him, but her eyes were glazed, unfocused. He gripped her shoulders and shook her, but her only response was to continue her desperate breathing and trembling. The massive Spartan shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Krystal. Forgive me." He whispered to her quietly. She gave no inclination that she had heard him, but he had to assume that she understood. And with that, he pulled her forward and made a swift jab at the back of her neck, putting the Cerinian into the sweet blissful silence of unconsciousness.

They carefully moved Krystal back into the longhouse and set her on the table near Wolf. Jorge assigned AJ and Murphy to alternate watches for when the two woke up. As the two Lylatians slept, one in forced unconsciousness, the other in a drug-induced stupor, the storm raged on.

A few hours later found Jorge on one of the covered watch towers, staring into the downpour, his seasoned gaze searching the treeline for movement. Rain often made sentry duty difficult, but Dr. Halsey had been kind and insightful enough to modify the vision of her Spartans. To the marines, all that could be seen was falling water. But to Jorge, the forest wall to the north could be easily observed. And as he watched, something moved in the distance. It seemed as if this colossal storm wasn't enough to deter some of the more ferocious predators. Jorge turned to Jenkins and pointed to a pair of goggles, but a peal of thunder so loud it reverberated within his chest drowned him out. Immediately behind the thunder, a split-second of daylight filled the sky, and Jorge saw them.

They were large, if he were to compare all of the dinosaurs he had seen thus far. Standing at nearly twenty-five feet in height, and blending into the colors of the forest, were a pair of theropods; two legged carnivores. However, as Jorge stared, they simply disappeared from view, until only their outlines could be seen. He squinted, but they became no clearer. Another peal of thunder, and then the lightning cast the dinosaurs into contrast again " and they were camouflaged perfectly with the forest behind them!

Jorge tapped Jenkins and pointed, keeping his eye on the chameleon-like carnivores so as not to lose them. Jenkins searched for them, but he just shook his head.

"I don't see a thing. You sure there's something out there?" He said, keeping his eyes to the binoculars.

"Just wait for the next flash. You'll see them." Assured Jorge, his eyes boring holes into the creatures. Sure enough, lightning arced through the sky once more, and Jenkins jumped when he saw them.

"Murphy's mother, those things are big! And they're like chameleons or something! It's almost better than Covvie cloaking tech." Jenkins said, amazed at the primitive species being so good at hiding.

"They do have limits, so long as they don't move. We studied them as children. I believe they are Carnotasaurs. Kind of like a T-Rex bred with a really big chameleon. But I never knew they hunted in pairs..." He trailed off as he squinted again. When another loud BOOM echoed through the night and the lightning accompanied it, the Carnotaurs were gone. With the flash, Jorge saw them steadily moving towards the gate, their speckled hides looking freaky moving against the stationary background.

"Uh oh." Jorge said, and jumped down from the watch tower. Jenkins followed him, a worried expression etched onto his face.

"What? What gives?" He asked.

"They're on the move."

* * *

><p>Krystal floated in empty space, her thoughts muddled and groggy as she struggled to fight the sleep that had claimed her. Jorge had put her out of danger, yes, but now she was stuck waiting in dream

space until she woke up. Feelings of impatience and annoyance towards Jorge welled up, but she quelled them with little effort.<p>

He was just doing what he thought was best. Krystal thought, more to reassure herself than anything. But now, as flashes and washes of color and random sound washed through her dreamscape, all she could do was reflect.

The deaths of her people. The loneliness of space. Her joy when she found Sauria, the panic when the planet wrenched her ship from orbit. All of it was a roller coaster of bad and worst times. When she found Jorge and the others, however, there was some good. They were good people. Murphy wasn't the most friendly being in the galaxy, but he had a good heart. Jenkins and AJ were young, but perfectly capable at their jobs. AJ especially, although she couldn't discount Jenkins for when he killed the Tyrannosaurus.

And Jorge was... complicated. By far the oldest of the four, he always exuded confidence. But from her glimpses into his mind, deliberate or accidental, she could see that he was a very sad, broken man. He always thought of his team, his home; more or less his family, for he did not remember his real parents. Chief Mendez and Dr. Halsey had been all the parenting he had needed. But for all their intelligence, all their planning and procedures, the members of the Spartan-II and Spartan-III programs all lacked one thing: a home.

Jorge called Reach his home because that was where he had been trained and stationed every now and then. The others on his team had considered Onyx their home, though none ever saw again once they were deployed. From what she could glimpse of Murphy's past, his home planet was now a burned out shell, destroyed by the Covenant. Jenkins was born on a space station near Earth, but it had been decommissioned due to age and maintenance problems. AJ was orphaned on Reach for a time, but the military found him before any loving parents ever did. And Krystal had just watched her planet break apart and literally explode, destroying everything and everyone she had ever held dear.

In a sense, they were all lost, frightened children, struggling to find a home. It was sad, really, to think about it like that. From her glimpses of their lives, things hadn't always been so bad. There had been good times too. But now, as she floated in unconsciousness, all she could feel for her companions was pity.

I too pity them, Channeler. But their problems may wait. Krystal gasped in surprise as a voice echoed throughout her consciousness, old and commanding. It humbled her beyond the point of speech, though it seemed the unknown voice was keen on it being a one-way conversation anyways.

Our planet is dying, Cerinian. Much as yours did. The Spellstones are lost. The Krazoa are trapped within their shrines. If no one helps, this world will end just as Cerinia did.

A mask appeared before her, giving her something to focus on. It was carved of stone, and not terribly detailed, but she could still make out a plume of feathers, eyes bored deep into the stone, a flat nose, and a long, sloping chin. It looked as if someone had taken Jorge and stretched his mouth downward to an almost comical length.

"Now now, my dear. We can poke fun at looks at a later time. You must hold your companions together, and never let them falter. A great hardship approaches, one that your new friend will be of great help in."

An eerie calm filled Krystal's mind, pushing her back into slumber. She resisted at first, fighting just to hear the words from this unknown spirit.

"Be still, little Cerinian. Gather the Spellstones. Free the Krazoa. Save this world, and you may find salvation for you and your friends as well."

The pressure from the ancient consciousness withdrew from her mind, and Krystal lapsed into oblivion once more.

* * *

><p>When Wolf came to, the room was incredibly dark. He tried to look around, but his neck was stiff, and he felt woozy. He reached up to rub his eye, but that action in itself seemed to drain all of his strength. Whatever they had given him, they hadn't been too stingy about it. Fighting sleep, the Star Wolf leader sat up groggily, his balance off kilter. He managed to sit up, hunched forward, and looked around. The helmeted soldier, Murphy, was staring out the window toward the raging storm, sitting in a wooden chair and being the antisocial douche that Wolf had pegged him for. The bald one, AJ, noticed Wolf's return to the land of the living and strode forward, a cup in his hand. He held it out to Wolf, who numbly grasped it. Wolf nearly dropped the cup of clear liquid trying to get his fingers to cooperate, but he soon had it clenched firmly in his hands.<p>

"You're tougher than you look, man. We gave you enough to put Jorge out for a day." AJ said with a grin.

Wolf could believe that they gave him a lot, but he had a sneaking suspicion it would take more than morphine to bring their behemoth of a Spartan down. He tried to ask about the liquid, but found his tongue had the feel of a bag of cotton balls. Noticing his discomfort, AJ motioned toward the cup.

"Just drink some water. That's one of the downsides to an anesthetic: you sleep with your mouth open." Nodding in agreement, Wolf tilted the cup back at his lips, and nearly drowned when his mouth quit working. He coughed and sputtered, but managed to drink it once he took smaller sips.

To his credit, AJ didn't make fun of him. The bald man simply checked Wolf's pulse while his patient gingerly sipped water. Finding nothing amiss, AJ declared the lupine mercenary 'not dead' and told him to take it easy.

The dull roar of rain and thunder played hell on Wolf's ears, though he could ignore it if he focused on something else. And that led to a chatty nurse.

"You said something about wingmates earlier, right?" Seeing nothing wrong, Wolf just nodded.

"Well, we were thinking it over, me and Murphy, and we decided that the best thing to do is search the mountain once this storm passes. That'll give them plenty of time to find shelter, and everyone will be a little well rested." The marine cast a glance toward the other table-born member of their party. "And hopefully she'll be awake. If it weren't for her, we never would have gotten to you in time."

Wolf followed AJ's gaze, never getting to actually appraise the female in question. Now that he could, he was sorry he hadn't earlier. She was a looker, that was for sure. Fox or not, she was still decently curvy, and fitness was obvious. Her telepathy and blue fur definitely threw some kinks into it, but over all she was a heck of a girl. _If we do find Panther, I'll be beating his skull in because of her._ Wolf thought grimly. While she was certainly attractive, he doubted she'd go for mercenaries. Her entire manner (what little he'd seen of it) and primitive attire screamed innocence. Wolf had nearly burned Lylat to nothingness, but he still had a ragged sense of honor. She was off limits, both to him and his teammates.

"So, what's it like being on a team with a telepath?" Wolf managed to croak out, before going back to guzzling water. He kept most of it down this time.

"Not really that much different from anyone else. She promised not to root around in our heads, and for all we know she hasn't lied." AJ cut his eyes to Murphy. "There's still a trust issue here and there though. Namely Murphy, but he hates everyone who ain't human. And when aliens scorched his planet, I think he has a right."

Somehow, Wolf could sympathize. At least, he thought he could. No matter how nice they appear, people that are a whole other species don't exactly scream trustworthiness. The whole 'aliens killed everything I held dear' thing might also be a factor.

"You said we'd look for them after the storm?" He glanced toward the window, where Murphy stood guard. Or just watched the storm. The guy was hard to read with that microwave oven he called a helmet.

"When exactly is the storm going to end?" That was a question AJ didn't have an answer for. Luckily, the antisocial ass watching the storm outside ever so delicately answered their question.

"This damn storm is huge. The thunderheads go on for miles. It'll last for several days, at least. Cloud to ground lightning, torrential downpours, the works. We won't be leaving this village for at least a week." He snorted, then turned and walked out of the longhouse, slamming the door roughly as he left. Wolf and AJ exchanged looks.

"What's up his ass, I wonder?"

AJ made a vague gesture in front of Wolf.

"Imagine the longest, roughest, most splinter-likely pole in the galaxy, then coat it in salt." That summed it up quite nicely.

* * *

><p>Jorge and Jenkins were too far from the longhouse to make it there and lock the secondary gate at the same time. Since Jenkins was fast and Jorge was strong, the obvious choice of splitting up was made. Unfortunately, Jorge still had to kick the scout's ass back towards the longhouse. He reached the gate, unfortunately, at the same time his unwelcome guests did. Just as he was about to push the gate closed, a scaly snout protruded from the outside and blocked his attempt. Realizing the futility in trying to slam the dinosaur's nose in the door, he quickly slipped behind a nearby guardhouse, getting to cover just as the Carnotaur forced the gate open completely.

The large animal was much more intimidating up close. As Jorge peered through a gap in the guardhouse's wall, he took in the red, scaly hide that was no longer focused on camouflage and the horn-like protrusions above the predator's eyes. It's general color was one of a maroon, like it was coated in dried blood. The thing wasn't so large as to shake the ground with its footsteps, but Jorge could still feel its presence. No sooner had the first Carnotaur make its way in did the second appear, sniffing curiously despite the driving rain. Jorge could see puffs of breath rise from its nostrils, the hot air condensing in the lowered temperature.

Across the way, Jenkins plowed over Murphy in an attempt to get into the longhouse, send the elder marine into a cursing fit. He flung the door open and stormed in, startling AJ and the still-recovering Wolf.

"We got dinos, guys. Big ones!" He said hurriedly. AJ didn't bother asking, snatching his Assault Rifle from the nearby wall and throwing a pistol to Wolf. The mercenary caught it deftly, examining it. It was no blaster, but it didn't take a genius to know that you were supposed to pull the trigger while aiming at something you want dead.

"If one of them comes in, open up. You've got seven shots and good stopping power. There are spare mags on the table." Without waiting for a response, Jenkins and AJ bolted out the door, stopping only momentarily to help Murphy up and explain. Wolf raised an eyebrow, then shook his head.

"Like hell I'm sitting around here..." He muttered to himself. Steeling himself with a breath, Wolf slowly set his feet onto the ground. The sudden movement gave him a small case of vertigo, but nothing he couldn't handle. His legs felt like they were asleep, but that would surely pass.

Moving slowly, the lupine merc grabbed the three spare magazines and examined them. After looking at them and then searching the pistol in his hand, he thumbed a button on the grip and the magazine inside the gun slid out, clattering to the ground. Wolf grunted and scooped it back up, sliding it home and stashing the spares in his jacket. Slumping forward on unsteady feet, Wolf walked out the door, magnum in hand. No way was he going to be left out.

* * *

><p>Back outside with Jorge, he had managed to slink around the towering carnivores and quietly close the gate, locking it in place and preventing any other unwanted visitors. Now they were trapped

inside with the Carnotaurs, but he didn't plan on that being an issue for long.<p>

As if reading his mind, AJ and Jenkins slunk out from behind another building, their eyes on the two predators now standing in the middle of the village.

The Carnotaurs were a curious pair, if a bit dim. They had just sat in the center of the village, sniffing here and there in search of prey. They growled every now and again, but for the most part they were silent. It was like they were listening...

One of the Carnotaurs sudden turned quickly, its speed surprising all of the humans, and roared in the general direction of AJ and Jenkins. The other turned and snarled as well, both eyeballing the wooden building. Figuring the jig was up, AJ and Jenkins rounded the corner and opened fire.

The staccatto fire of the twin Assault Rifles confused the dinosaurs, and the round punched into their hides. The two predators roared in pain, but something was off. Even as the marines maintained steady fire, Jorge looked at the ground beneath the dinosaurs and saw that not even a drop of blood hit the ground. _The bullets weren't penetrating!_

Finally shaking off the pain, the Carnotaurs set their stances, snarled, and charged. And so did Jorge.

7. Terrible Twosome

I love this story. And apparently, so do you. _Heroes_ by **Shinedown**.

Chapter 7

* * *

><p>The trembling ground of the two charging dinosaurs nearly threw him off balance, but Jorge stayed his course. His own feet pounded the dirt into oblivion as he approached the meeting point between the Carnotaurs. As focused as they were on AJ and Jenkins, the two did not notice the behemoth of a man charging them. Jorge watched the front carnivore's legs and stride, picked a rough estimate ahead of it, and lowered his shoulder.<p>

When he had been among the lucky thirty-some odd Spartan-II recruits to survive Dr. Halsey's augmentations, Jorge and another Spartan, Samuel, had easily been the largest two of the bunch. What Sam had in brains and brawn, Jorge had in spades. His own personal training afterwards had turned Jorge into a wall of muscle. The additional boost granted by his MJOLNIR armor made him capable of throwing tanks around.

So when this half ton of Spartan slammed into its leg, the lead Carnotaur felt its footing leave it at about the same time it hit the muddy ground. The dinosaur squealed in surprise â€" a loud, high-pitched sound that Jorge did not expect â€" as it toppled, kicking wildly. Its kicks landed on its partner, who roared in surprise as it was thrown off course. This gave AJ and Jenkins the

breathing space they needed as they hurriedly reloaded their weapons.

"AJ! Jenkins! Use AP rounds! Normal rounds don't work!" Jorge shouted, his arms still wrapped around the Carnotaur's leg in an attempt to keep it pinned. Since he was in between them, the kicking of the other foot was the only thing holding the standing carnivore at bay.

"Yeah, we noticed. On it!" Jenkins and AJ pulled out magazines with red bands painted onto them, signifying that they were armor-piercing rounds. Just as they loaded it, Jorge released the Carnotaur's leg and tried to get some distance from the two. Unfortunately, he would get his wish and more when the leg he'd had trapped began to kick.

"Gah!" AJ and Jenkins looked up, rifles ready, just in time to see Jorge go sailing through the rain â€" missing the still groggy Wolf by centimeters â€" and through the wall of the longhouse. Undeterred, the standing Carnotaur decided to follow the wounded prey toward the longhouse while its brother floundered to stand. AJ and Jenkins poured the pain onto the still prone dino, and they noted with satisfaction that their rounds were having effect now. Red blood began to paint the ground around the Carnotaur just as it struggled to its feet, and its roar of defiance was tempered with a whine of pain. Unfortunately, their rifles ran out of ammunition at this time.

While those two â€" where Murphy had gone, Wolf had no idea â€" faced their predicament, Wolf woozily looked up at his pain in the ass for the evening. The Carnotaur towered over him, examining him intently like a cat would a baby bird. _Which is funny, because that thing looks more like a bird, and a wolf can look like a cat sometimes..._
woah, I am high right now._

Hoping that the adrenaline would push the morphine-fueled silliness out of his head, Wolf raised his new pistol and sighted up on the dinosaur's chest, presumably where all the main plumbing was. The dino snarled and took one step forward, but Wolf had already pulled the trigger.

For a small gun, the sound was deafening. It nearly made the world go silent for Wolf, but the low whine produced by the dinosaur as he shot hit home still reached his ears. He fired two more times, sending several splashes of blood onto the ground, only for it to be diluted and washed away by the pouring rain. The Carnotaur regained its footing and snarled at him, and Wolf's single eye got a little wider.

"Oh boy." With that, he turned and sprinted off the porch, though the drugs made his coordination shit. He nearly stumbled as he jumped down onto dirt, but he rounded the corner just as the Carnotaur took the corner off, roaring in fury as it chased its fleeing prey.

With the marines, the two younger ones were hiding behind another wooden building, their two AP magazines consumed in the hail of gunfire they had treated their dinosaur to. It hadn't been happy about it. Murphy peeked out from across the way with his prize: a DMR with AP rounds loaded. Since it was a caliber higher than the standard MA5B Assault Rifle, The DMR would definitely have a much

better effect on their dinosaur friend. He took careful aim, his shoulder braced on the wall next to him, and fired two shots into the dinosaur's stomach from behind. The Carnotaur turned its head in his direction, faced him completely, and bellowed with all of its might. Unfazed, Murphy let three more rounds fly, this time hitting it high in the chest. The massive carnivore's bellow turned into a wheeze, and Murphy could accurately guess he'd hit at least one lung.

Still, the Carnotaur stumbled forward, intent on plowing through Murphy and his building. The grizzled veteran took three more shots " this time he went for the throat " and rolled around the back of the building, sprinting away. He rolled away just as the Carnotaur charged into the hut, shattering two walls and the roof. Dazed and weakened, it fell over on its side, blood running freely down its front. The dinosaur tried to get up, but failed with a soft whine. Its breath came in short, ragged gasps, and it failed to stand. It was done. AJ and Jenkins came running up just as Murphy took aim. His bullet followed the optical nerve into the brain, ending the dinosaur's life and misery.

AJ poked the dead dino's hide with his boot, ignoring the pooling blood.

"I think we got it." He said, looking up at the other two. Jenkins nodded in agreement, but Murphy shook his head.

"We got one. You two geniuses forget about the other one chasing our friend?" The other two lowered their gaze slightly at his rebuke, and turned just in time to see Jorge emerge from the hole he'd made in the longhouse's wall. The gargantuan man rolled his shoulders, then looked around. He saw the three marines walking over to him from a dead Carnotaur and an even more dead house, but where was Wolf and the other one? He turned to his right and examined the chunk missing from the corner, as well as the footprints leading away. Cursing in anger, he took off after them, the marines lagging behind. Murphy scurried around to look for any supplies that had gone flying, while AJ and Jenkins cautiously followed Jorge around the bend.

Wolf had made the decision minutes ago that this had not been a good plan. As he rolled under the Carnotaur's legs and behind it for what had to be the millionth time, he was sure the dinosaur would agree with him. Behind him, the ground trembled as his pursuer gained on him, forcing him to curse and make another turn. He was lost, he knew it. But all he had to do was find one of the outer walls. I just hope this big lizard's skull isn't too strong. He worried as he rounded the bend, Carnotaur sliding in the muck behind him. He took a few more turns, dinosaur gaining all the while, until he came to the massive perimeter wall. Perfect!

Wolf sprinted up to the wall and turned. Sure enough, the Carnotaur was charging right at him. He fired the rest of his magazine in rapid succession, the loud blasts deafening him as the magnum rounds punched right through the dinosaur's hide. It took them like a champ, charging ahead anyway. Wolf stuffed the magnum into his holster, not bothering to figure it out now. As the dinosaur got steadily closer, it was all Wolf could do to stand completely still, shoulders rigid and teeth bared. Finally, when he could smell its breath as it hit his face, Wolf dove to the side, allowing the retarded animal to slam full bore into the walls. The perimeter fence creaked and moaned, but the dinosaur definitely came out of it worse off. The bull-headed

Carnotaur whined and its momentum carried it to the ground. The large dinosaur sat there, dazed for a few precious seconds, allowing Wolf to stagger to his feet. The movement, however, attracted the downed carnivore's attention.

Instead of standing up, the Carnotaur lurched forward, intent on catching Wolf in its mouth with even getting up. Its teeth snapped precariously close to Wolf's shins, forcing the wounded mercenary to step back. The chameleon-like predator lurched forward again, sliding farther because of the slick mud the rain had turned all their dirt into. This time, it managed to knock Wolf to the ground, pretty much punching him with its snout. He hit the ground with a wet smack, and the mud clung to him like a primordial goo. As the wounded merc groggily attempted to get to his feet, the Carnotaur had ample time to do the same. A shadow fell over Wolf just as he got to one knee, and he looked up to see that the Carnotaur was up. And he wasn't.

Crap.

Just before the dinosaur could snap him up for lunch, however, movement out of the corner of Wolf's eye caught his attention. The movement turned into the form of Jorge flying through the air, landing on the side of the Carnotaur's head. The momentum and weight of a fully armored Spartan-II sent the carnivorous dinosaur back down to the ground, and this time it wasn't getting up so easily. Wolf watched in amazement at Jorge wrestled with the large dinosaur, stretching to his limit while grasping its horn-like protrusions that sat on either side of its head. Jorge's immense strength and superior leverage gave him the temporary advantage, but he knew that if it got its feet underneath it the dinosaur would recover.

The next moment would go down in Wolf's memory as the coolest thing someone other than himself had ever done. With a colossal wrench that used every bit of strength in his arms, Jorge torqued the dinosaur's head sharply, snapping its neck with the sudden movement. Its struggles lessened to slight twitches, and those eventually subsided to a complete lack of movement. Jorge has just broken a _Carnotasaurus' _neck!

Jorge let the dinosaur go, panting heavily from exertion. Despite his badass kill, it had been a lot more difficult than he had expected. His arms hung limp at his sides, sore from extending as far as they had. The rain pounded down upon him and washed the muck from his armor. He was tired, far too tired for a soldier.

I guess my age is catching up to me... He mused. Finally noticing Wolf, the Spartan held out a hand.

"Are you going to get those nice threads all muddy, or do you want to get out of the muck?"

Wolf took his hand and pulled himself up, ignoring the twinge in his leg. He grinned, brushing the muck from his jacket before regarding Jorge with a look of somewhat respect.

"That was incredible! I mean, I could've handled it, but not bare handed. Nice job." Considering this was Wolf that was dishing out compliments/thanks, it was a big deal. Since Jorge didn't know Wolf that well, the enormity of Wolf's offerings went right over his head.

More or less unscathed, the two started to head back to the inner village. They ran into a breathless group of marines halfway there, all three slick with mud and a bit of blood.

"What happened to you three? You look like hell." Jorge said with a grin.

"Psh." The noncommittal noise came from beneath Murphy's helmet. "Says the guy that got kicked through a building."

Jorge winced at that particular memory. Maybe he wasn't as old as he thought he was. As the marines turned and they all rounded the alley back into the main area, Wolf noticed the gaping hole in the side of the longhouse wall. He gave a low whistle when the others followed his gaze, and Jorge winced once again as all eyes turned to him.

"It didn't hurt as badly as it looks lads. I'm fine." He flexed his arms slightly to get the point across. "Besides, this armor wouldn't let me get hurt." The marines just nodded and accepted it, but Wolf was giving his armor a strange look.

"That suit do you many favors?" He asked with a glint of jealousy in his eye. Before Jorge could give him any specifics, AJ threw in his two cents.

"Don't even try, man. Even without the big guy in it, that thing weighs half a ton. You wouldn't even be able to lift it. It's got so many toys and so much armor that Spartans are the only ones who can use it." The bald man said with a shrug from his position near the first downed Carnotaur. The knife that appeared in his hand piqued Wolf's curiosity. He began cutting into the large theropod, his knife sinking into the lower belly near its thigh. Even though he knew the man's knife was extremely sharp, the blade was having a tough time cutting through the thick hide. The lupine mercenary half walked, half limped over to where the young Lieutenant was cutting away, while Jorge accompanied Murphy into the longhouse. Jenkins climbed the watchtower near the main gate, since he was technically on watch. The rain tapered off slightly, something Wolf was thankful for. He sat on the still warm leg of the downed Carnotaur as AJ gutted it, watching with mild fascination as the man dismembered a creature that had considered him a meal minutes earlier.

Inside, Murphy and Jorge were tossing chunks of wood out of the longhouse, clearing the floor of the collateral damage caused by Jorge's attack on the dinosaurs. Krystal still lay inert on the table, her nervous breakdown a thing of the past as she slept peacefully, breathing softly and quietly. The rain outside still poured down, so it was assumed that whatever sent her over the edge was still going on as well. As the two looked at the enormous hole in the wall left from Jorge's flight through space, it became clear that whether she was awake or not, Krystal would need to be moved to another place. Preferably one with stronger supports.

"The middle of the village has a cave-like meeting hall." Murphy said as the two watched their alien friend sleep. "Thick walls, tight ceiling. From what I can tell, there's only one entrance. We could take her there." He shrugged as he said it, though Jorge could see his issue with Krystal had not blown over. Much like the storm outside, something hovered over Murphy's head, causing him to be tense like was, especially when near Krystal. He obviously still had

a few issues.

"Thanks," Jorge said, still watching Murphy, "I'll get her there, and maybe we can store our supplies from the Pelican there too." He was too tired to fully consider Murphy's personal issues, so he just went the professional way. Murphy nodded in a quick, bird-like manner and stomped off. Jorge watched him go for a few seconds, before another dull ache settled in behind his shoulder blades. He groaned in irritation and windmilled his arms in an attempt to cull the irritation. It faded somewhat, but still remained as another bloody annoyance. He winced as it stayed put, then stomped off toward the cave, out the door and back into the grey day. Krystal slept on, only moving slightly as she continued to commune with their unknown benefactor.

Outside the lodge, as Jorge trudged past, Wolf and AJ took turns skinning and cleaning the immense dinosaur, the skin obviously tough when put against the standard weapons that they carried. Wolf, with his bad leg, simply compiled and trimmed the strips and patches of skin with his knife, while AJ and his sharper blade alternated between muscle, fat, and skin as they gathered what they could from the creature. Jenkins made his way closing the gates as best he could, then started running magazines too and from the longhouse to replace the rounds they'd spent tackling the terrible twosome.

"So," AJ began, the sharp white sheen of a thighbone highlighting his progress, "what's Lylat like for the great pilot O'Donnell?" Wolf winced a bit at the choice of topic, but he acquiesced.

"Empty, for us at least. It was just me and Leon for a while until we found Panther. There were others, but they either turned traitor or had... other allegiances." A growl accompanied the second utterance as his mind flashed to Andrew Oikany. The stuck up brat had been nothing but a hassle during Andross' last campaign against the Cornerians. Star Wolf had split without a single drop of payment, which had led to their sorry excuse for the ship that had put them on Sauria.

"Is that because you're a nefarious mercenary, or simply because there are so few of your people?" AJ prodded, ignoring the sensitive subject. Wolf snorted mirthlessly.

"Oh, there are plenty of people, alright. And most of them would prefer to see my head mounted on the bridge of the Great Fox." Even mentioning the flagship of his sworn rival made Wolf see red, though the only tangible evidence of his irritation were his clenched fists. AJ smirked and pointed his knife at Wolf.

"NOW I smell a story. Tell you what: we'll trade history. I tell you the reason why Murphy's a xenophobic little shit, and you spill on your Lylat... thing you've got going on." He went back to carving the hide, whistling as a rather large piece of meat came from the bone. The ball was in Wolf's court.

The leader of Star Wolf hesitated, and for good reason: while mercenary was a nice, ambiguous role, including the humans in on recent Lylatian events also meant revealing his former employer. The memories of what he had done on Andross' payroll unsettled his conscience and his stomach: what had been a means to an end had turned into a lot of bodies in his wake and blood on his hands. He

had personally commanded several Venomian assaults in some hope that Star Fox would show, but McCloud had always disappointed. In the end, he knew that his ledger was dripping red, and there was little he could do about it.

"Alright." Wolf finally managed to growl, throwing his knife downward to stab into the still wet mud, sinking to its hilt. "Our recent happenings have a very personal touch to them. There are a bunch of minor details but one thing is unquestionable: we just got out of a system-wide war." He grimaced as he remembered streaming over countless planets, his Wolfen fighter knocking down Cornerians in flights and squadrons. Leon had been beside him then, too, though the other half of the unit was a lost cause. Pigma would probably fuck money if it had an orifice tiny enough to still his little cocktail wienie in, and Andrew had been so infatuated and indoctrinated by his uncle that he'd become a puppet: no free will or identity, just blind obedience.

"There were two names in the war, Venomian and Cornerian. Almost a dozen other planets were involved, but the main government resided on Corneria. It's a clear, peaceful urban planet with cities everywhere, though not enough to have major pollution issues. They were the 'good guys'." Wolf supplied the air quotes dryly, before shaking his head. "Both sides had soldiers, and soldiers always do terrible things. That's how I rationalized it until my head caught up with my pride."

Wolf fell silent as the two stood up and piled the salvaged materials from their attacker and turned toward the guardhouse, a cool and damp place perfect for temporary storage. Wolf limped beside AJ, who shortened his strides enough for the lupine pilot to keep up.

"I was a member of the other army, who was based on the planet Venom." Wolf grimaced, as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Looking back, the signs were obvious that these guys weren't the peaceful type. The planet most of them grew up on was largely an exile, for all the races that the Cornerians frowned upon. Rodents, primates, reptiles..." He trailed off for a second. "Wolves. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of things to hate about Corneria, but it wasn't the outright racism that pitted me against them. Anyway, Venom earned its name with its horrid climates. Poison clouds and constant dry weather made it the worst place in Lylat to be. It had also been used as a factory waste dump site before most Lylatian companies were forced to go green, so that didn't make matters much better. But that was where most of them lived, so they scraped by. Given the exile, it's not hard to imagine a little bit of resentment. And there was more than enough there when Andross came along."

The two reached the guardhouse and found three shelves carved into the thick planks at shoulder height, and deposited their labor there. Wolf winced when he stretched upward slightly, an uncomfortable twinge echoing up his weak leg. Once everything was stored, the two sat on the compacted dirt, shuffling into opposite corners in an attempt to get comfortable. Wolf noted with some regret that his previous encounter with Dickasaurus Rex seemed to have chased the pain killers from his bloodstream, leaving his healing wound to annoy him with even the tiniest movements.

"Ok, so what happened next?" AJ was hoping for more of a story simply because it would pass the time. Wolf looked down at his hands with a

sigh.

"What can I say? War happened. In the beginning, Andross was just a fellow Venomian, charismatic and loaded with cash. He preyed on the rejection and anger, and the Venomian war machine was built almost overnight. We were the first contracted squadron, Star Wolf, though the only original members were Leon and I. Andross tossed Pigma and his nephew Andrew on as both support and a way to keep tabs on us." Wolf reached into his vest and produced a set of dog tags, laser-cut and shining bright even in the darkness.

"I was so caught up in taking down Star Fox that every battle that lead up to them was just a means to an end. By the time I actually encountered the team, four burning worlds and a few thousand dead Lylatians lay in my wake. They didn't bother me until after the first skirmish: we were brought on by Andross to guard a bomb planted in a remote airbase on the planet Fichina. Star Fox wiped the floor with us, and defused the bomb." Wolf's hand subconsciously flew to his cyberpatch, a grimace crossing his face as he remembered the return to base. "Andross had nearly killed us for the failure."

"After we lost again, losing a whole space station to Fox's team, I guess the time spent in the medical unit changed me. I had nothing to do but talk to Leon and think over the past few months. What had been a professional rivalry had turned into wholesale slaughter, and I'd been party to a lot of it." The mercenary shook his head at that. "Things I did in the spur of the moment haunted me for weeks, screams and faces that I just couldn't get out of my head."

"I can see how something like that could happen." AJ said, trying to draw attention away from the fact that Wolf had killed a lot of people. Innocent people. "You were so focused on beating Fox that the rest just blurred by. I get it, man." Internally, however, AJ was reevaluating Wolf; his view of the merc now drastically different.

"Yeah, well... it all ended on Venom. Star Fox had carved a path through the Venomian forces, and the Cornerian fleet had followed them. We duked it out one last time over Venom, and my heart just wasn't in it. See that blasted team had gotten my fire going again, but every time I pulled the trigger, it wasn't Fox's Arwing I saw. It was one of the civilians or soldiers that I had killed. Needless to say, I was too distracted to put up a fight. Pigma's fat ass got taken down quickly, and Andrew wasn't even in the air for twenty seconds once Falco locked onto him. Leon's a good pilot, but with three of us walking, he got overpowered pretty quickly."

The scenes flashed before Wolf's eyes, watching all four Arwings dip and dive as they closed in on Leon's Wolfen. The craft went down soon after, and Wolf remembered shaking his fist halfheartedly as Star Fox dove into the depths of Venom's underground base, where Andross was defeated in his grotesque form.

"Leon and I did our best to repair the Wolfen that I had set down, and we made it to a backwater space station before the Cornerians completely blockaded Venom. It was the last time I saw Pigma, Andrew, or Star Fox." He shrugged at this point. "After that, everything kind of stagnated. We lost a bit of our name when Andross went down. A few odd jobs here and there, mostly running fleeing Venomians to the outskirts of Lylat for cash. We scraped together whatever we could to

fix the Wolfen, but we eventually ended up trading it for that garbage heap scattered all over the volcano." He jerked his finger in the general direction of the crash site.

"A week later, we meet Panther, and he tells us about this planet that has a bunch of old ruins on it and no space-faring government. We show up here, fall out of orbit and...voila." He spread his arms and indicated his current predicament of messed up leg and missing team. "Here _I_ am."

AJ, for the most part, felt sorry for Wolf. Not that he'd actually say it. "I'm sure your guys made it clear. Except for you, Krystal couldn't find anyone else out there. The others probably got sent to the other side of the volcano." AJ grinned sheepishly, but he wasn't convincing himself, let alone Wolf.

"Alright, sunshine, let's hear your side of the story." Wolf said gruffly as he crossed his arms. "What brought you to this prehistoric dump?"

AJ scratched at the stubble beginning to grow on his chin; his shaving kit had been left behind before their mission to blow the Covenant carrier. Where to start?

"Well..." He began. "let's start from the beginning of _our_ war. We had no idea â€" absolutely NO idea â€" that there was intelligent life out there. None. We'd explored dozens of planets and the most alien thing we ever found was a bunch of carved rocks. Dead race or just natural phenomenon, we never had a close encounter. Until Harvest." He scooped up some loose dirt in his hand and raised it, letting it flow from his grasp like sand.

"Imagine that you run a system of planetary colonies, all of them with at least a few million people. There are many political, environmental, and social issues, but the biggest difficulty is keeping everyone fed. So we pick the most fertile planet, a.k.a. Harvest, and give it the responsibility of feeding the entire galaxy. And it does." He suddenly let go of all the dirt in his hand, kicking up dust as it hit the ground.

"Thirty years of growing food, Harvest is a shipping paradise. We've got state-of-the-art artificial intelligence running several thousand tons of food _a day_. Suddenly, a few freighters send out red alerts and then go dark. A few days later, UNSC colonial marines check out one of the wreckages, and bingo: aliens."

"So they just blasted you from out of nowhere, huh?" Wolf said with a wry grin. "Could be worse." AJ's eyebrows climbed up his bald head like sidewinding caterpillars.

Oh believe me, it did. After we dissected a few dead aliens, a ship shows up in orbit. At first, they're all 'we come in peace', and suddenly, things go sour." AJ licked his lips as images from the first contact flooded his mind: burning fields, slaughtered civilians, and a Covenant ship barely hanging in the air as its Jiralhannae troops alternated between killing and pillaging.

"A single ship, not unlike what we crashed down here in, razed an entire planet. We were outgunned from the beginning. We lost world after world, even in cases where we outnumbered them three to one we

were left drifting in space. What attempts at peace were made failed at the first message. They didn't want land, gold, water, etc. Their only goal was our extinction." Fire crept into AJ's voice as he remembered gunning down Seraph after Seraph in the failed defense of a crippled frigate. No matter how many he had swatted down, every ship he had been assigned to (five in total) had gone down due to superior firepower.

"Don't get me wrong; we rocked their world in ground engagements. Our tanks were superior, our tactics always winning out, homefield advantage, ya da ya." AJ waved the accomplishments away like annoying smoke. "But none of it mattered once they finished the space battles. Once they killed our last ship, they used beams of plasma to turn our planets into glass. Oceans boiled, atmospheres dispersed. We pulled out every stop, but they always walked away victorious."

"Sounds frustrating." Wolf said with some genuine sympathy. "Every time we lost, I was the last one on the field. Can't imagine sitting there watching your friends go down." Wolf averted his eye, sudden aware that he was bringing up bad memories.

"As bad as this sounds, you get used to it." AJ said grimly. "We lost men by the thousands, but every defeat, there were these men and women who just kept fighting. I mean, there were a good bit of regular seamen and marines that just gave the bastards everything. You'd see them too â€" guys who just sit there and fire, even though their buddies are either dead or gone. Because that's all they have left to do. They eventually went down, every one of them, but you couldn't help but cheer them on."

"I've seen similar." Wolf said with a downward glance. "Soldiers who have every reason to quit, and just don't do it. It makes me feel less of a man every time, because I'm not there with them." AJ nodded in agreement, an identical look on his face.

"There was one time, on a civilian space station that was a part of our navigational system, a live feed was streamed from the command center as it was being stormed. There were escape pods, though at that point it would have been moot. But the entire bridge crew went about deleting everything that would lead to other worlds. And this security officer, big brute of a guy, backs in with two assault rifles going full auto, like out of an action movie. He locks the door and says they're the last ones left. No one even stops. They all know what's going to happen to them, and not one of them quit until the data is gone forever. After that, everyone pulls a sidearm, and they wait for the door to come down." AJ let out a mirthless chuckle.

"They all let out the yell when it caved in, and the Covvies actually stopped for a moment. The civilians just tore them down with all they had, screaming in defiance like they were invincible." His grin faded.

"The feed cut when the Covvies blew the whole station. Fifteen civilians had forced the Covenant to cop out and destroy their only chance of finding our worlds. These guys had basic military training, and they fought like animals to protect people they'd never met." AJ said with something akin to wonder. It was humbling; to see men fight and die while clawing and tearing at their enemy, and walk away defeated was the greatest shame one could face as a warrior. Wolf had

seen it as well; Cornerian Rangers, cut off as the rest of their forces pulled out, ruthlessly cutting down Venomian troops. Soldiers who knew deep down that they were dead men, showed outstanding courage and tenacity. He'd personally watched a husky, blood running down the side of his black face, tear out a lizard's throat with his bare claws in a rage. Wolf had taken him down, ending the melee with a headlock that had snapped the brave Cornerian's neck. Wolf still had the man's tags.

"After that, they came for Reach. It's the cinder block of our military; nothing gets through there. We've got Super MAC defense platforms, over a hundred destroyers, frigates, and battleships. They came unprepared, but they still dished out quite a solid attack force. That was when we sent in the Spartans." Wolf's eye widened slightly, though he could certainly guess who a Spartan was. Jorge had that superior look to him.

"These guys are indestructable. Super strength, fast as hell, and thick armor. They NEVER go down." AJ nodded toward Jorge's general direction. "They never quit, they never die, and they never stop. A single Spartan will take down squads of Covvies with ease. We just so happen to get assigned to take down a Covenant supercarrier alongside two Spartans. Jorge is one of them." AJ held up eight fingers to represent the number of team members.

"We lost four Sabres in the fight to subdue the corvette, the ship we eventually landed with. Another three went down just entering the ship. At the end of it all, it was just the Spartans and us three. The newbie Spartan still had an airtight suit, or at least that's the BS Jorge fed him. He kicked him out the ship with a reentry pack and gives the guy his dog tags as a parting gift. He detonated this Slipspace bomb, pretty much a jump drive without engines, and off we went. We took the entire Covenant corvette with us, and tore the supercarrier to shreds. A few controlled crashes, and here we are." He said with a flourish of his hands. Wolf smirked; even though his had been more clear cut hero-versus-villain than anything, they had experienced similar fights, similar emotions. And they had killed. In a way, it made the humans that much more... familiar. He still wasn't exactly ready to trust them completely, but they were easier to identify with. If it came down to it, he could probably convince Leon and Panther to stick around.

If we find them, that is. He thought with a frown. The odds of finding his squadmates in perfect order were negligible, and though he was somewhat embarrassed to admit it, he hoped it was Panther that was the worse off. Leon had been his wingman since they'd both learned to fly. Panther becoming dino-stew was tolerable, but he'd never forgive himself if Leon died on this stupid venture.

"So, do we need anything else from the survival goods department of Big and Tall over there, or can I burn it now?" Wolf asked gruffly, planting his hands in an effort to get up without irritating his wounded leg. AJ was up quickly and pulled him the last foot, then looked down at the supplies they'd gathered.

"I'll tinker with this stuff for a while. The meat's good for a few days as long as we cook it, and I'll need practice before these skins become wearable." He said as he ran a hand across his bald scalp.

"Alright. I'll try to make the carcass as unappetizing as possible, or we'll be doing this song and dance until the star goes out." Wolf said, pulling a curious canteen and a lighter from his vest.

"Yeah, I guess a dead body is dangerous in itself around here." AJ said with a frown. He turned to the assortment of organic gatherings, already palnning out cuts and seals, while Wolf shambled out to go about his grim task.

Krystal felt the world come into focus quickly, no longer feeling the weightlessness of her comatose state. She opened her eyes weakly, the dark cave giving her a bit of reprieve from the harsh sunlight that should have stabbed into her retinas. _They must have moved me._ She thought to herself as her hand came up to rub her eyes sleepily. She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, working out the kinks brought on from sleeping on hard surfaces. Now feeling somewhat better, the Cerinian sat up slowly, hlad that her head was clear of the overwhelming telepathic presence that had put her under earlier that day. The words of the Krazoa still echoed in her mind, and she was fully aware of how important it was for the others to hear the warnings. Her feet found the cold, dry rock tentatively, and she had to walk a bit before her coordination caught back up with her. The back of Krystal's head was pounding, a hint that perhaps the storm hadn't been the culprit behind her forced slumber.

"Jorge will have to answer for that one," She said to no one but herself. Had she scanned the room as she had been trained, however, she would have found that she wasn't alone.

"Since you were close to having a nervous breakdown, he probably saw it as a kindness." Murphy's snide comment startled her for a second, her eyes scanning the darkened passageway for the xenophobic Sabre pilot. She heard the material of his uniform shuffle somewhere to her right, and fcoused on that.

"It was, I just wish that it hadn't been necessary at all." She said uneasily, her eyes finally becoming accustomed to the dim light. Murphy was leaning up against the cave wall, arms crossed and helmet on like always. She mirrored the pose, something that provoked a humorless chuckle from the irritable man.

"We couldn't predict walking, talking aliens that didn't shoot at us. Don't expect us to be able to psycho-storms coming either." He said bitterly, as if the whole problem was her fault. Did he really think she had CHOSEN to be a Channeler? She gritted her teeth at the thought.

"It's not like I can just stop listening, Murphy. A presence like that was enormous; it was solid, cold, and absolute. It was like a great cloud within my head trying to escape." It was the closest approximation she could make with the language she was using. Murphy didn't reply, though she could sense his apathy even without telepathy.

"Jorge is in the antechamber ahead; I'm sure he'd _love_ to see you up and about." Murphy jerked a thumb in the direction of the hallway behind him, which was undoubtedly better lit. Krystal nodded and brushed past him, unwilling to put up with his unwarranted dislike any longer than was required.

She heard the pilot grumble a few underhanded insults as she passed, and she actually stopped. Jorge had said that Murphy's problems were his own, but the Cerinian was finally over the older marine's attitude.

"I'm sure your wife would have something to say about this wonderful attitude you have toward me." Krystal said with some heat. She felt him stiffen behind her, and his voice got much lower.

"She'll never say anything ever again because of some alien freaks. Now get out before I lose my temper." His tone brooked no further conversation. That was fine by Krystal. She was done talking anyway.

* * *

><p>My deepest and slightly insincere apologies. This one just sat in my folders, half done and forgotten, for nearly four months. Did not mean for it to stay there as long as it had. It also occurred to me that there are some who do not know the stories of these two universes, and I provided as personal a synopsis as I could. For those of you better versed in Halo's history, contact me if you see any discrepancies. As for Lylat's backstory, this is exactly how I would like it.<p>

End
file.